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FAILURE FRAME

I BECAME THE STRONGEST AND **ANNIHILATED EVERYTHING**

WITH LOW-LEVEL SPELLS

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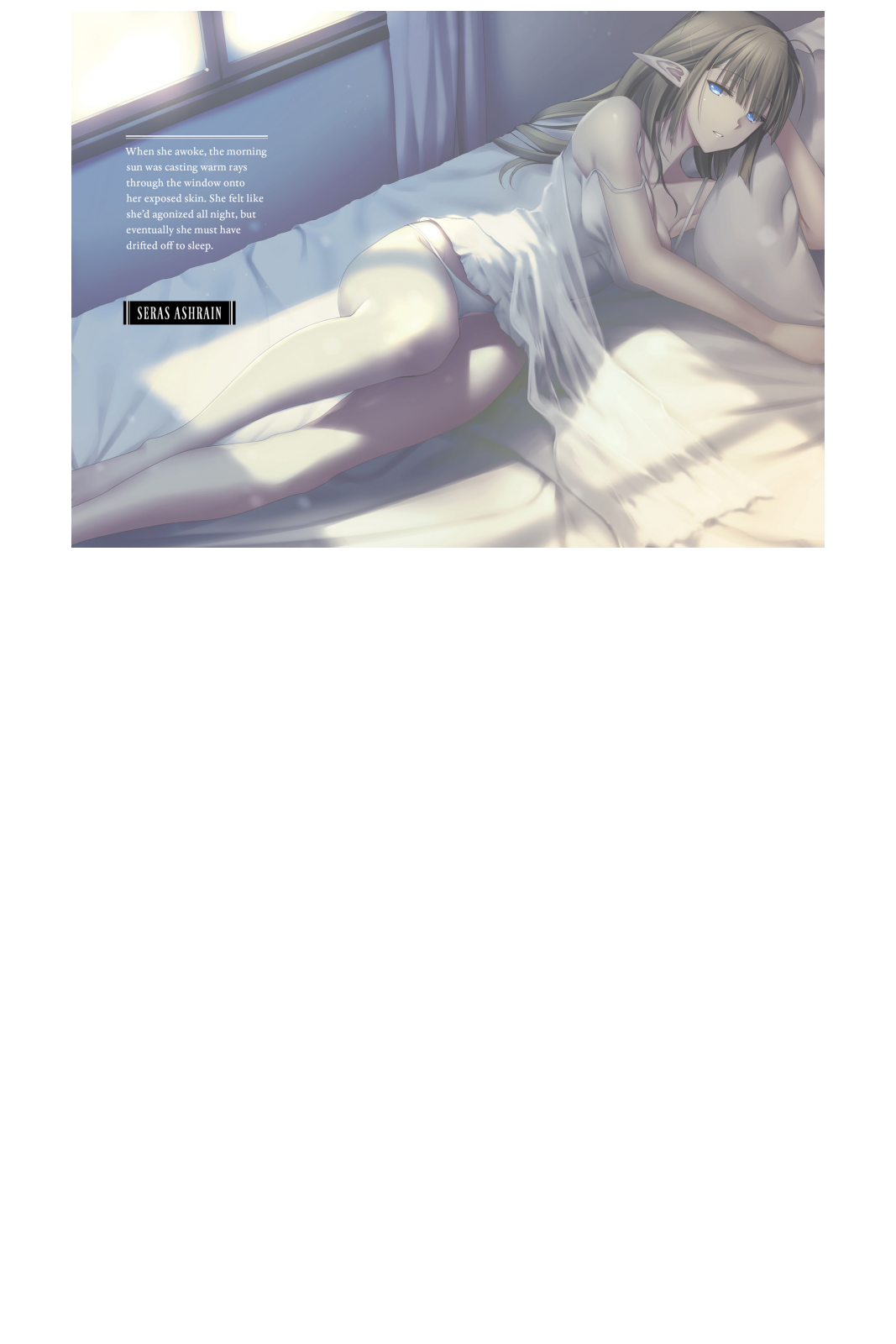
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|| TAKAO HIJIRI ||

|| TAKAO ITSUKI ||





When she awoke, the morning sun was casting warm rays through the window onto her exposed skin. She felt like she'd agonized all night, but eventually she must have drifted off to sleep.

SERAS ASHRAIN



CIVIT GARTLAND

—THE STRONGEST

FAILURE FRAME

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WITH LOW-LEVEL SPELLS



WRITTEN BY
KAORU SHINOZAKI

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Seven Seas Entertainment

HAZURE WAKU NO [JOUTAI IJOU SUKIRU] DE SAIKYOU NI NATTA ORE
GA SUBETE WO JUURIN SURU MADE VOL. 2

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Illustrations by KWKM

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Chapter 1: The Famed Monsters of the World

I THOUGHT ABOUT WHAT IT REALLY MEANS to be free.

The Ruins of Disposal that foul Goddess consigned me to were hellish, but down there I found myself, true and unfiltered. I looked death square in the face over and over again, but I also finally felt like I could make all my own decisions, carve my own path. I didn't have to care about what anybody else thought of me. I carried that sense of freedom with me long after leaving the ruins.

I can do whatever I want... I will do whatever I want. I'm going to be true to myself, and embrace the consequences.

Nothing can stop me now.

I'm finally free.

I decided to head toward the nearby city of Mils, but first I spot-cleaned my clothes at the river to get off the worst of the dirt. People are more likely to trust you if you look clean and presentable, after all.

I thought back to the girl I'd encountered in the forest.

She's probably headed in the same direction I am. We never even exchanged names...it's not like we're traveling together, though. No need to get too involved. I think she was hiding something—she seemed worried about revealing too much.

"I know how *that* feels," I muttered to myself. "All right, let's see about this Mils place, then..."

"Squee!"

I wrapped Piggymaru around my torso, concealing him under my slightly cleaner robes, and set off toward the city. Crunching my way through the forest, my chest felt tight and strange, like something was wrong. Piggymaru squeaked at me curiously.

"I don't know, it's just...I feel like I'm missing something."

I frowned and kept walking, my eyes drawn to the heavy canopy of leaves above my head.

The sun's setting—lucky I have my leather pouch to see by.

I'd grown accustomed to the dark in the Ruins of Disposal; this

forest was practically luxurious compared to that. Still, I wanted to make it to Mils before dark if I could.

Eventually I found a path, somewhat paved and level, and a wooden arrow that read *Mils*.

I might make it there before night after all.

After walking for a while, I began to see people on the road. Most of them looked like travelers, with horse-drawn carts laden with goods and packages. The first I saw of the city was a great wall in the distance, protecting it from its enemies. Finally I approached a gate, where a man and a woman stood guard with spears in their hands and swords at their belts.

I should try to make a good first impression, huh?

“Don’t make any noise down there, okay?” I whispered to Piggymaru. It responded with a tiny “Squee!” and burrowed deeper into my robes.

“If it looks like you’re going to be found out, you know what to do, right? You know the signal?”

“Squee!”

“Good.”

I took a deep breath, prepared myself for the worst, and tried to look confident as I strode towards the gate. Just as I expected, the female guard called me out.

“Wait. You. New here, ain’tcha?”

So, Mils doesn’t get a lot of new faces? Or maybe she just has a really good memory?

I nodded.

“Hmm... No weapons I can see, anyhow. You a mercenary?”

“Well, I *am* here looking for work.” I tried to stifle a nervous chuckle, but the guard looked satisfied with my answer.

“Oh? Heard that we’re clearing our ruins and came to make your fortune, did you?”

Clearing ruins? Well, they can’t be as dangerous as the ruins I just came from...but I don’t want to give myself away. I should choose my words carefully.

“Yeah. It sounded like an interesting opportunity,” I responded, avoiding any details and staring up curiously at the city walls. “I didn’t expect such a prosperous city, though. I’ve been away from civilization for a while, and these walls are quite the sight.”

“Hmph. If this is enough to impress you, I can’t imagine the countryside hole you must’ve crawled outta!” she replied, looking me over. “Your clothes are in bad shape.”

“I’ve been on the road a long time. Milsa was further than I expected.”

“You’re in *Mils*, not *Milsa*. Get it right! You some kind of idiot?”

I smiled apologetically.

“Sorry about that.”

“Come on, at least remember where you’re headed! You the king of the country bumpkins or what? You even know your own name?!”

I could tell she didn’t see me as a threat, but I decided to give her a final push.

“Look.” I held out my trembling hand for her to see. “To be honest, I...I’ve been shaking like this ever since I caught sight of the gates.”

“Ha ha ha! You all right there, kid?! I swear, we had a pretty girl through here earlier who looked like more of a warrior than you!”

Huh...could that be the girl from the forest?

The guard put her hands on her hips and smiled condescendingly at me.

“Well, I guess somebody’s gotta carry bags for the *real* mercenaries! Hey, can we let this one through?”

The male guard raised his hand in reply.

“We’re on orders from the Baron to let in as many mercenaries as we can for clearing the ruins. I guess he counts. Go on, then, you can pass.”

I tried to look grateful.

“Thanks, I’ll do my best!”

As I passed through the gate, my mouth curled into a smirk.

“Just as planned,” I murmured to myself.

There was no body or luggage check at the gate—security was surprisingly light, and the guards probably decided who could enter on a whim. I crossed a bridge over a small river and found myself inside the city.

When they called this place a city, I wasn’t sure what to expect, but...

I was on a long, straight, stone-paved road, lined with buildings

that looked and felt like they were out of a countryside town in Western Europe. The pavestones looked stained and worn by a great many footsteps over decades or even centuries. This main thoroughfare bustled with people going about their business.

“First, find an inn,” I reminded myself.

I ended up finding three options and ranked them by the clothes of the patrons walking in and out of them—expensive, reasonable, and cheap.

Given my current outfit, I should probably avoid the expensive one.

I decided to head to the cheapest and ask their rates for a night. I entered the inn, doing my best impression of a background character.

“How much for a night here?”

“That’ll be 800 makha.”

Apparently Makha is the name of their god of commerce. The girl in the forest told me a lot of random information along with what I asked—the price of a loaf of bread.

I pondered my options. I could easily afford the room, but the cheapest inn only had shared rooms available. Since I had Piggymaru in my robes, I decided to head to the middle-of-the-road inn and try my luck. That place was 2000 makha, and the innkeeper said something about the clearing of the runes attracting so many visitors that I was lucky to find a vacancy. The innkeeper might be taking advantage of me, or somebody else might take the room while I was searching for another.

This place’ll do, won’t it?

I noticed the innkeeper staring and realized he didn’t look particularly happy with me.

Oh, I see...

“I’ve been on the road a long time, and my clothes have seen better days. Do you know somewhere I could wash them? Oh, and if you have any clothes you could sell me, I’d appreciate it.”

I took out a silver coin from my pouch, laid it on the counter, and pushed it in the innkeeper’s direction.

“Just a token of my appreciation. I’ll wash before entering the room, of course. I don’t want to ruin your bedding.”

The innkeeper’s expression flipped in an instant, reservations disappearing completely.

“R-right you are! Thank you ever so much, sir! Please, let me

show you to your room. I'll prepare fresh clothes at once!" he said, hurriedly taking my measurements with a salesman's smile.

"Just a moment. I'd like to leave my luggage in the room before bathing, if you don't mind."

"Yes, of course! Right away! Might I ask your name, sir—?"

My name, huh? Luckily, I don't think they're going to ask me for ID. I shouldn't use my real name—I need a pseudonym.

"Hati Skoll," I responded quickly. They were the names of two wolves from a Norse myth I read once. I doubt anyone in this world would pick up on the reference.

"Mr. Hati! I see!" boomed the innkeeper, writing it down in his ledger. "Here's the key to your room! I'll prepare you a change of clothes and a wash basin, so please go on ahead~."

He really has changed his tune, huh? Does he think I'm some kind of nobility? Maybe I should dial it back. I don't want to be so generous that everyone remembers me.

After exchanging a few more pleasantries with the innkeeper, I headed up to my room. It was fairly big, with one bed next to a small window and some simple furniture. Clean enough, too—it looked like the inn was kept in decent order. I laid down my leather pouch and locked the door. Once I was sure we were alone, I spoke to my little buddy.

"Piggymaru."

"Squee."

The slime squelched out onto the floor.

"Could you hide somewhere in this room for a while? I can't keep you with me while I'm washing up."

"Squee!"

Green. Affirmative.

"There's a good slime. And don't forget—if anything happens..."

Piggymaru transformed before I was even finished speaking. A small, perfect sphere was now before me, hard to the touch, like a crystal ball.

"Perfect."

"Squee. ♪"

If anybody asks, he's a crystal ball—a training tool for a magician or fortune-teller.

I returned downstairs to find the innkeeper waiting for me.

“Everything is ready for you, Mr. Hati.”

“Thank you.”

“Right this way, if you please.”

The innkeeper showed me to a sheltered outdoor washing area behind the inn. There was little daylight left, so a lamp had been hung out, illuminating the area. Washing lines hung overhead, and there was a small roof to shelter me from the rain. Arranged under the roof were a washbasin for clothes, a large wooden table, and a covered bathtub in the corner.

After scrubbing my clothes clean, I quickly washed myself in the tepid bath. At least I'd look a bit more presentable. Once I was clean and dressed in the clothing the innkeeper had given me, I gathered my wet clothes and headed back up to my room.

“Ahh... We finally get a break, huh, buddy?”

Piggymaru squelched out from under the bed as I sat down.

“Squee~!”

Piggymaru began shaking, wobbling back and forth idly.

“Squee squee squee squee.”

Apparently, this is supposed to mean “don't mind me~! ㄹ” You know, like he's pretending to be an inanimate object. Can he sense that I'm thinking about something important? If so, this slime can really read the room.

“Well, anyway...” I stroked my chin, deep in thought.

I think I'll be able to rest up here in Mils and prepare for the rest of my journey. No need to worry about money for a while—those White Walker guys had a lot on them when they died, and I have the gemstones if that runs out.

I need to figure out where I'm going. My first step should be to find someone who can read these Scrolls of Forbidden Magic. The Forbidden Witch who lurks in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters? I guess that's my first stop.

“I also need more information about this Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters...”

This would be a lot easier if I had somebody I could trust enough to ask directly.

“Also...”

I looked down at Piggymaru as he wobbled around on the floor.
Monster enhancement solution—I should improve Piggymaru's

fighting skills. Maybe someday I'll be sending him out in front to fight for me.

I left the inn to search the town. The night was dark, but the main street was even more crowded than before, lit up with lanterns and packed with people. There were food stalls and street vendors hawking their wares.

Nobody seems suspicious of me, as far as I can tell.

There were a number of people who looked like travelers, many of them holding swords or other weapons at their sides.

I guess you're allowed to carry weapons around in town, then.

I walked around, peering into windows of shops that interested me. It seemed you could get anything here—tools, weapons, clothes, and food, either from the street vendors or the shops and taverns that lined the street.

“This city has everything you could need all on one street. What’s that over there—?”

Is that a staff on the sign? Does this world have magic stores?

The building was strange, to say the least, like something straight out of Europe in the Middle Ages.

“Oh, over there...”

I looked over to see a fine-looking building with a scroll of parchment on its sign. *Maybe that's the city hall? Somewhere you can make and check documents or have things printed?*

Walking closer, I saw travelers and people who looked like warriors hurrying in and out.

Or maybe it's an adventurers' guild or something?

I explored more and found a small temple nearby. I hoped the people of Mils didn't worship that foul Goddess, Vicius. There was also a red-light district, to put it politely—you could just tell.

I don't have any business with either.

I returned to the main street, glad I'd gotten a clearer picture of this place. By then I was getting hungry, ready to head back for the night. Half the first floor of the inn was a food hall that doubled as a tavern.

After checking in with Piggymaru, I made my way downstairs and chose one of the tables in the center of the room. I had a few good reasons for eating down here—one being that I wanted to try the food of this new world. I ordered what the innkeeper suggested and was

presented with a bowl of soup—rice and meat boiled with some kind of fragrant greens. There was also a small, hard loaf of bread, which I set aside for later. I took a hesitant sip of the soup.

This is really good—just spicy enough. I had some doubts but I see why the innkeeper recommended it. I could get used to this other-world stuff...though I wonder what kind of meat this is. Kinda expensive, too, but I honestly think it's worth it.

I took a drink from the clay cup that came with my meal. It was filled with an opaque liquid the innkeeper called *alama water*, which immediately filled my mouth with a tingling mintiness.

The food isn't what I'm used to, but it's delicious. It's already half gone, though—I'd better slow down. The main reason I came down here was to gather information, after all.

I settled in to eavesdrop on the other patrons.

"Since the boss put out that call to arms, Mils has gotten real busy, huh?"

"We've even got mercs coming in from other towns! The old guys who own the inns must be rolling in it!"

"It's that new floor they found in the dungeon—everybody wants a crack at the loot!"

After several minutes, here's what I've learned so far: Boss. Mercenaries. A new dungeon floor discovered. There are ruins here, too... I wonder if there was an ancient civilization here, and all that's left are dungeons.

"Anyway, you hear the news?"

Another table's conversation stole my attention.

"What?"

"The high elf knight!"

"High elf? What's so high about 'im?"

"I dunno. Who cares? Dark elves, high elves, they're all the same. You got pointy ears, you're an elf in my book."

Apparently elves exist in this world. Dark elves, too.

"Listen, will you? I'm tryna tell you something here!" The man cleared his throat. "So like I was saying, the captain of the Band of Holy Knights went missing in the Holy Empire of Neah, right? And it turns out she's actually some noble from a high elf country! All the mercs are talking about it."

"What are you blabbering about? Why would some high elf even

be fighting as a knight in the first place?”

“Beats me. I hear there’s a bounty on her, though.”

“Yeah, but what’s that got to do with me?”

“Well, the bounty poster they’ve put out for her... She’s hot. Like, *unbelievably* hot.”

“Seriously?!”

“Go to the mercenaries’ guild and see for yourself.”

“Heck yeah! We oughta go pay our respects later.”

“Right now it’s packed to bursting for clearing the ruins, and I wouldn’t recommend messing with any of those guys. No telling what they’ll do to you if you piss ’em off.”

Mercenaries’ guild. Was that the one with the scroll on the sign? Maybe they organize things like bodyguards, quests, and monster hunts. It was pretty busy when I passed by, and the people there looked like they knew their way around a fight.

“But I thought elves lived inside those illusion barrier things, hiding away from humans. Why would one be walking around outside?”

“I hear they’re so beautiful, they’ll make even the toughest mercenaries’ hearts race!”

“The slave traders would give you their right arm for one of them!”

“Are elves even that strong?”

“Not on their own, but they use, like, a weird power from spirits or something.”

“Spirits? Creepy.”

The drinkers sure are loud, and drinking makes them talk way too much. At least it makes them easy to listen in on. I wouldn’t want to go drinking myself, but this is a great place to get information.

“You hear about the Great Demon Empire?”

The Great Demon Empire, and the Demon King’s armies on the march, headed this way. The whole reason I was summoned here in the first place.

“The mercenaries are talking, yeah. They say the Nightwall’s fallen up north.”

“I still can’t believe it. You think they’ll make it this far?”

“Nah. This far south? Never.”

“What happens if they keep heading south and, like, meet up with the monsters in the Great Ruins?”

“It’s not gonna come to that, but if it does, the Goddess Vicius’ll sort them out. And we’ve got monstrous bands of knights and soldiers of our own!”

That foul Goddess... I guess she’s pretty well known.

“Yeah. Whose armies do you reckon are the strongest?”

“I hear the Wildly Beautiful Emperor Falkendotzine’s Band of the Sun has never lost a battle!”

“Even with the Nightwall gone, I wouldn’t count out the Kingdom of Magnar’s White Wolf Knights, either.”

“Yonato—over in the west—has their Holy Order of the Purge, don’t they?”

“We’ve even got monster-slaying knights of our own down here in Ulza!”

“Yeah, but...”

“The Bakoss Empire’s got the strongest warriors on the continent—their Black Dragon Knights.” All three men nodded in agreement.

“No question about it.”

“You know I hear the Elite Five are practically a country unto themselves with how freakin’ strong they are! Especially those two, the Heroic Blood Slayer and the Strongest Man in the World...”

“So the Bakoss Empire and the Demon King’s armies are gonna go at it?”

“Ain’t that Princess Knight from the Holy Empire of Neah? Their Band of Holy Knights are pretty strong in their own right, ain’t they? And I hear they’re all women.”

“But Neah just rolled over when the Bakoss Empire came to invade.”

“We’re neighbors with Bakoss, ain’t we? You really don’t think we’re in trouble?”

“No way. We’ve got the Kingdom of Alion to back us up. The peace treaty’ll keep us safe.”

“They already done their hero summoning, you reckon?”

“They’re not exactly known for telling people what they’re doing. They might be training an army of heroes as we speak.”

One of the men shoved his chair back noisily and raised his glass.

“Enough already! We’ve got good drink and good meat! There ain’t a thing in the world worth bein’ scared of. Nothing can beat us, not heroes, and definitely not that blasted Demon King!”

“I’ll drink to that!”

“Country or no country, we drink!”

“Well said!”

“Cheers!”

“Ha! Bottoms up!”

They downed their drinks, and the conversation turned into an argument about who had to buy the next round.

That’s enough for today...

I went back up to my room on the second floor, happy that I’d at least learned the names of some new countries.

Those knights have nothing to do with me, though—my only concern is Alion. I couldn’t expect anything really useful out of that conversation. It was just small talk over drinks.

“I should buy some supplies for my journey and leave Mils sometime tomorrow.”

I stopped in my tracks in the hallway.

“Wait a minute...”

Do I remember—?

I hurried back to my room, where Piggymaru squeaked a greeting at me.

“Oh. First things first.”

I threw the bread I’d saved from my meal to Piggymaru, who gleefully started eating.

“Squee, Squee~! ♪”

“So...”

I took the thick volume of *Forbidden Arts: The Complete Works* out of my leather pouch, sat down on the bed, and started flipping through the pages. My fingers finally settled on a word.

“...This is it.”

I knew I’d seen the name before. It’s been bugging me ever since I met that girl in the forest. I should’ve caught this earlier.

Monster Enhancement Solution—Ingredients.

Skeleton king powder (necessary for enhancement).

Slime → Effective.

Necessary for second experiment.

Currently active skeleton king monsters:

P29

Mils ruins (lower floors).

Ruins of Disposal Scouting Party

A GROUP OF MEN walked through the Dark Forest.

“What do you think happened to those corpses?” asked one, turning to look back at the remains they’d just passed. The party leader glanced over at him and shrugged.

“Who knows? Probably just some mercenaries with bad luck.”

“You think they were on their way to Mils?”

“Can’t imagine they’d be this far out otherwise. We’re the only ones with business out here.”

The newest member of the party was deathly pale.

“First time seeing a decomposing body?” asked the leader.

“Y-yes...” he responded.

The corpses were in terrible shape. Four of them, no real faces or distinguishing features left, all ravaged by monsters or wild animals.

“Can’t have been much good at mercenary work if the monsters in *this* forest were enough to take ’em down,” said a large man, gesturing to the sword swinging at his belt.

“They didn’t have any coin on them, did they?”

Sometimes stray corpses could earn you some pocket money. The party went through their belongings, but to no avail.

“Probably bandits or something—I’ve heard some bad rumors about this place.”

“You think one of those things escaped the Ruins of Disposal?”

“Ha ha ha, then I guess we’ll go find some of those monster-slaying knights and bring ’em here, right?”

“Ha, sure.”

When the joking died down, one of the men frowned and gestured them over.

“Hey, we’re here.”

The Ruins of Disposal stood as quiet and still as they always did.

“Nothing out of the ordinary?”

“Never is.”

“That’s what I love about this job. Let’s give the place a once-over and get going already.”

Regular inspections of the Ruins of Disposal were a joint effort by the kingdoms of Alion and Ulza.

An important step to ensure friendly relations between the two countries, thought the leader. *Easy work, great pay—I'm glad I'm the one who gets to do it.*

He took a crystal ball, handcrafted by the Goddess Vicius herself, from his backpack. He approached a large, crumbling wall and touched a spot on the brick. *Thunk* came the sound, and a small hollow appeared. He placed the clouded black crystal ball inside.

The work was easy, they all knew, just as they knew exactly what kind of place the Ruins of Disposal was. None of them cared. It wasn't any business of theirs who the Goddess marked for death.

"Huh?"

"What's up, boss?"

"It's not changing color."

The crystal ball wasn't reacting at all. Usually something in the hollow would start glowing, and the ball would glow in reply, but...

"Boss! D-does this mean..."

"Yeah."

The leader looked concerned, wrinkling his brow.

"Crystal must be broken."

"You think these magical device things can break?" asked one of the party members, tapping the clouded ball with his index finger.

"It's real old," said the leader. "We'll have to ask her to make us a new one."

"We've gotta go all the way back to Alion, you mean?"

"Nah. We've got that annual report in six months, don't we? Let's just tell her then."

"You're sure?"

"Getting a report all the way to Alion is going to be a real pain in the neck, crossing borders and all that... Besides, nothing looks different, right?"

The scouting party prepared to leave the ruins.

"Not like anybody's ever gonna make it out of this place alive, anyway~!"

"Ha ha hah! Never in a million years!" The whole group laughed as they turned to leave the Ruins of Disposal.

“No matter how far back through the histories I check, ain’t no record of anybody escaping this place. Not ever!”

The Ruins of Disposal were a death trap—nobody survived them. The scouting party leader returned the faulty crystal ball to his pack and led them out of the ruins.

“This job’s just too easy.”

THE NEXT MORNING, I went to get breakfast in the food hall. I was wearing the clothes the innkeeper gave me the day before and my newly dried robes.

I finally got a good night's sleep... How long has it been? I feel great.

Half the tables were already full of people with a soldier or mercenary look to them, some of them even drinking already. I ate quickly and went to talk with the innkeeper.

"Do you mind if I ask about this ruins-clearing business? The man recruiting for it is the Baron, I believe?"

"That's correct, Mr. Hati," responded the innkeeper. "I had an inkling that's why you were here. They've discovered a new floor in the dungeon. If you're interested, then..."

He explained that there would be a meeting today, and that anyone, even people who weren't members of the mercenary guild, could attend.

In other words, I'm in.

The meeting was to be held in a small square on the outskirts of town. I returned to my room, let Piggymaru hide under my robes, and headed out.

I arrived at the square half an hour before the meeting was supposed to start, but the area was already bustling with activity. There was a crowd of people who looked like extras straight out of a fantasy TV show milling about, waiting for the meeting to begin. There was a small platform in one corner of the square—likely where someone would be speaking soon.

Suddenly, a man's voice cut through the noise of the square.

"Oh ho?! *Someone* here is out of place, don't you think?"

Hm? Is he talking about me?

"Even under that cape I can tell from a mile away! Quite pretty, aren't you? Look at that body! There's real beauty under that hood, I just know it! You just *have* to be of noble birth! But why in the world would you be in a place like this?"

Not me.

I turned to see a tall, well-built man rounding on a slim girl in a hood.

"What do you want with me?"

I know that voice...

The tall man cupped his ear.

“Oh! And that voice! It’s almost as if...” The man fixed her with his gaze, as if he saw right through her, and announced with great certainty, “you’re the former captain of the Band of Holy Knights!”

The crowd murmured restlessly.

“Eh? That’s her? *That’s* Seras Ashrain?!”

“She’s from that high elf country, isn’t she?”

“I heard she disappeared when the Bakoss took Neah!”

“Seriously?! What’s she doing in Mils?!”

“Doesn’t she have, like, a huge bounty on her head?!”

He’s trying to draw attention, isn’t he...?

I watched the situation unfold.

That’s the girl I met in the forest. It’s hardly my job to intervene, though. I don’t owe her anything, and I don’t want to draw attention to myself, either. Besides, she looks like she can handle herself. She’s calm, collected... Could probably cut her way out of that crowd in a few seconds if she needed to. I would just be in the way.

The tall man kept pushing, getting more and more worked up as he spoke.

“In fact, I had the honor of meeting the captain of the Band of Holy Knights once before. My goodness, she was beautiful. But when I was kind enough to invite her to dinner, she flatly refused. Can you believe that?! Refused!”

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” said the girl.

He clicked his tongue.

“I see! It’s all coming back to me. You were just as disinterested and self-important back then, too!”

“...”

“That’s exactly why I remember you! Your face is burned into my memory! Your face, and those shameful, indecent breasts of yours! I remember you perfectly. Don’t play dumb with me! You’re a failed knight, a miserable runaway!”

“I’m sorry, but I think you’ve mistaken me for someone else.”

The man grinned.

“Then why don’t you show us your ears?” he demanded, gleefully jabbing a finger at the hood covering most of the girl’s head.

“That would settle it! Show us, unless you’re afraid of revealing the truth!”

He does have a point—you could easily hide the shape of your ears with a big hood like that.

“As I’m *sure* you good people are aware,” he said, addressing the crowd, “elves are rarely seen in Mils! And yet! We hear rumors of a runaway, do we not? A runaway high elf. Muah ha hah! Where a lesser man would relent, I stand firm! You’re Seras Ashrain. Admit it, pointy ears!”

He snagged the back of the girl’s hood.

“Ha! I’ve caught you off guard!”

He ripped down the girl’s hood, exposing her ears for the world to see.

“How’s about that?! I’ve found the Holy Knight! I, Monk ‘The Flash’ Droghetti, have found her! Look! Just look at her ears and see the truth!”

He froze.

“Wh... Huuuh?!”

The girl’s ears were clearly human.



Figures. Her ears had looked like that when I saw her in the forest, too. I wonder if she's here for the clearing of the ruins?

"I-inconceivable!! B-but..." sputtered the man, turning pale as he inspected the girl's face. "You look completely different now!"

"As I already told you," said the girl with an indifferent sigh, "I believe you've mistaken me for somebody else. I am not Seras Ashrain. My name is Mist Balukas. Now, are you done accusing me?" she asked.

"I-it... It can't be!" cried Monk, reaching out to touch her ears.

Smack.

She swept his hand away with a firm slap. He fixed her with an angry, envious gaze.

"I don't remember giving you permission to touch me," she said.

"Impossible. Impossible! It can't be..."

He went way too far, calling her out like that and causing a scene. Serves him right.

"I-if you aren't Seras Ashrain, then..." he continued, jabbing his finger in her direction and practically foaming at the mouth, "then what are you doing in Mils?! Why are you here?! Answer me, o-o-or your cover's blown, you hear me—?! You lying little b—!" Humiliated, he tried to save face, but his question had an obvious answer.

"I'm here to earn enough money to continue my journey," the girl answered without hesitation, removing a veil from the bag on her back. "Eventually, I'm bound for Yonato."

Yonato... I heard that name last night in the inn. They've got that powerful Holy Order of the Purge on their side, don't they?

"As I'm sure you're aware, this veil indicates that I have been summoned to join their order."

A holy order of warriors.

"Are you quite satisfied? I simply heard that the ruins here are being cleared and decided to stop to earn a little coin."

"Gh... Argh!"

The man was at a loss, and the crowd had tired of his spectacle.

"Seriously? He was practically screaming, but he didn't even have the right girl?"

"I almost believed him for a second there... The Princess Knight herself..."

"Doesn't look much like the wanted poster to me!"

“She’s being pursued by the Bakoss, ain’t she? She’d have to be insane to come to a crowded place like Mils.”

“That Monk guy’s ‘the Flash’, all right! Only took a *flash* to realize he was an idiot!”

Monk was trembling now, hatred swirling in his eyes.

“I won’t forget this humiliation. You beautiful women are all the same! Mist Balukas, you’ll regret this!” he shouted. He retreated to a corner of the square, gesturing angrily at Mist all the while.

Jeez, what are you so angry about? Suck it up.

I caught Mist putting her hood back up out of the corner of my eye.

I’d be lying if I said she didn’t interest me, too...

“Mistaken identity, huh?” I said to myself.

“Oh, they’re finally here!” exclaimed a mercenary.

I turned to see a horse-drawn carriage rolling into the square, armed mercenaries crowded around it for protection. When the carriage stopped, a broad-shouldered man stepped down and walked straight to the stage with his mercenaries in tow.

“Ladies and gentlemen! Thank you for coming! I’m sure many of you already know me, but for those of you who don’t, I am Cred Hurlkey—the Baron Hurlkey, if you please!”

“We’ve discovered a new level in the Mils ruins, and I’ve summoned you here to explore it! Additionally, I promise to pay a high price for any treasures you find down there.”

He went on to explain that we could take whatever we wanted off the monsters’ corpses—though he’d buy those, too, if we wanted to sell.

Looks like I can take that skeleton king powder home with me, then.

There would be a bag search before we entered and exited the ruins.

The treasures deep within the ruins all belong to the Baron, huh?

“While there are no rewards for your bravery alone, there is a reward of three hundred gold pieces for anyone who locates the Dragon-Eye Cup, long lost somewhere deep within these ruins!”

That got the mercenaries going.

“Oh man, the bounty on that thing’s getting higher and higher!”

“I guess he wants to see it in his lifetime.”

“Three hundred gold pieces! Wow...”

I guess that's a lot of money.

One of the Baron's guards unfurled a roll of parchment and showed us a picture of the cup. The Baron explained that it had been lost for centuries.

Not magical though, huh? Just a really old cup.

“My dream is to drink from it! Surely whoever sips from that cup will feel they have conquered the ages!”

Laughter rippled through the audience, most of it good-natured. *All right, get on with it, won't you?* it seemed to say. The Baron chuckled to himself and motioned to his guards to begin the proceedings. The guards moved quickly, taking down names in their registers. After giving my name, all that remained was the bag check at the entrance of the ruins.

They're really adamant that nobody steal any of these treasures...but all I want are my ingredients.

After registering, I was given directions to the ruins, which lay down a narrow path just off the busy square itself. I decided to double back to town to prepare to enter the ruins. On my way, I noticed a girl walking in front of me.

Mist Balukas.

I was gaining on her. As I passed, I saw her glance at me, but I chose to walk on in silence.

“Excuse me,” came a voice.

Well, I can hardly ignore her, can I? I have something to ask her too, I suppose.

“So you were headed to Mils too, huh?” I asked, playing it off like I'd only just noticed she was there.

“You're visiting Mils for the ruins clearing as well, I take it?” she responded.

“Yeah...that guy gave you some trouble, earlier, huh?”

“He was no real problem.”

“Even so, I'd watch out if I were you.”

“Why do you say so?”

“His face was bright red, and if looks could kill...”

The girl looked troubled.

“I sometimes have that effect on people. I always try to resolve

matters peacefully, but...it rarely works out that way. I frankly find it easier to be hated and spurned than to be loved and constantly approached by men like that."

"Maybe it's a whole love-hate thing?"

She gave a small, dry laugh.

"Perhaps. I really must be going."

"It's obvious you're trying to avoid everyone, you know."

She stopped and turned to look back at me, a thoughtful look in her eyes.

"I could say the same thing about you."

"Well, as one loner to another, I have a favor to ask," I said.

"A favor? What would you ask of me?"

"I need supplies and tools to enter the Mills ruins, but to be honest, I'm completely new at this."

"I see. You weren't aware of the price of bread, either, if I recall correctly. You need advice so that the merchants can't take advantage of you, I assume?"

She's quick on the uptake.

"That's about the shape of it. I'll pay you for your time."

I don't want to waste time arguing with shopkeepers. It'll be much easier to have somebody who knows their way around the merchandise. I think I can trust this girl, at least for the time being. If she's lying, well, I can cross that bridge when I come to it.

I looked at the girl, waiting for an answer. She was silent for a long moment.

"So what do you say?" I finally asked.

"I'm only here because I need funds to continue my journey. In light of that, I'd like to take you up on your offer."

"Then I believe we have a deal."

"So it seems. Please, leave the haggling to me. It will surely be simpler for you to make one deal with me than trying to make a deal in each shop."

"Sounds good, thanks. Let's get going, then."

I stopped. The girl was holding out her hand.

"Mist Balukas."

"...Hati Skoll," I answered, taking her hand. Her long, thin

fingers were white and smooth.

Do these hands really hold weapons? I expected her skin to be rough and coarse, but... Hm? She's making a weird face. Oh, I get it. She can tell when someone's lying, huh.

"It's not my real name."

"Sorry?"

"You noticed, didn't you? I have my reasons, same as you. I'm going by this name at the inn, too. It's not important for us to share our real names, wouldn't you agree?"

She smiled.

"Of course."

Deal made, Mist and I walked back to the main street together in silence.

It's for the best. I'm not looking to make friends; I'm just hiring her to help me as a one-time deal. She gets that, right?

...or so I thought.

"Where are you staying, Sir Hati?"

She's trying to start a conversation... No reason I can't just tell her the truth, I suppose. I told her.

"Oh, we're staying at the same inn."

I didn't see her yesterday...we must've missed each other.

"If you need money so badly, why didn't you stay somewhere cheaper?"

"I can't get a good night's sleep unless I have my own room."

"Really?"

She laughed ruefully.

"Oh, I've been that way since I was a child."

That answer seemed a little too quick...she must have another reason for needing privacy. Just like me hiding Piggymaru.

She motioned toward an equipment store.

"That's a good place to buy tools for exploring ruins and general travel."

I started to head toward it, but Mist didn't move at all. She looked deep in thought.

"Excuse me, would you mind waiting here for a moment? I have something I'd like to check," she said, before disappearing into the

alleyway behind the store. After a few minutes, she came back around the corner toward me.

“Apologies for keeping you waiting.”

“What did you go to check?”

“Perhaps the term *double-check* would be more accurate. I’m reluctant to even do this, as it’s rather too underhanded for my tastes, yet...I’m afraid it is part of my role as your dealmaker, Sir Hati.”

Sensible and serious, through and through... She seems pretty hard on herself, though.

“Let’s go inside.”

Inside, the store felt like an outdoor sporting goods store, with the same distinctive smell of wood and sawdust. Mist crouched down to check a price tag.

“The goods here are quite overpriced.”

The shopkeeper approached.

“I don’t know where you’re from, but we’ve got stock troubles like you wouldn’t believe! This ain’t the capital, you know. There are some things we just can’t make here in Mils, and with all those mercenaries in for the clearing, things have been flying off the shelves,” he protested.

“You must’ve anticipated the demand and prepared your stock, surely?”

The shopkeeper hung his head.

“Please. I’m a professional! I’m desperately trying to get more stock in, but it takes time for merchandise to get all the way to Mils. Wouldn’t expect a pretty face like you to understand. Look at my shelves, won’t you? We’re practically out of everything!”

“On my way to the shop, I passed through the alley, where there seemed to be a number of well-stocked crates. They seemed to contain all kinds of things,” Mist said.

“Th-those are empty!”

“Are they indeed? They were rather heavy for empty crates.”

“Wh-what were you doing touching my merchandise?!”

“My sincerest apologies. They were somewhat blocking my path through the alleyway, you see, so I took the liberty of clearing the way a little.”

“Grr...”

“Incidentally...” Mist looked innocently at the shopkeeper. “Did

you just accuse me of touching your ‘merchandise’? I thought they were merely empty crates.”

The shopkeeper was speechless as he realized his mistake. He sighed.

“Why do I get the feeling this isn’t your first time haggling?”

Mist smiled, her expression softening.

“Traveling the road, you have to save money wherever you can.”

“Right, right.”

The shopkeeper thought for a moment. Mist glanced over at me.

“We need to buy enough supplies for the both of us. I think this could prove a moderately profitable transaction for all parties, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Tch, fine... I’ll give you a bulk discount. Good enough? I’ve got one condition though.”

“Go ahead, state your terms.”

“Don’t tell the other mercenaries about those crates. If they find out I’ve been cheating them, I’m finished. I’ve gotta make my money where I can. You want a discount, you keep my secret.”

“We won’t say a word.”

“Then you’ve got yourself a deal.”

The shopkeeper grumbled his way back to his counter and sat down.

“Shoulda just carried the crates inside the store! I’ve been getting lazy with all the business lately, huh...”

It’s lucky that Mist and I are the only ones in here.

We each took a turn buying equipment for the journey—at about a third of the list price.

Wow, this guy was really trying to scam us...

As we left, I looked back to see him hurriedly rearranging his stock and rewriting price tags—he probably realized that his hard-sell tactics had been too obvious. When we reached the door, it suddenly opened to admit a crowd of mercenaries. The shopkeeper gave Mist a meaningful nod, which she returned.

After leaving the equipment store, we repeated the exercise at several other stores around town.

This should be everything I need for the ruins.

A change of clothes, a belt...a shortsword in a leather scabbard.

Some small tools for gathering materials from the monsters I kill, peeling their hides, and crushing their bones. A sleeping bag and a backpack, and a little food, too, though I always have my leather pouch for food and water, just in case.

I organized the space in my backpack into two main areas—one for equipment and food, and one for the ingredients I hoped to pick up.

Still more than enough space left, but it's better to travel light. I spent all my time wandering around in the Ruins of Disposal with just a single bag. Food, water, bedding... That's all I need to survive. Speaking from experience.

"Here's your payment. Thanks for the help," I said, handing Mist three silver pieces.

Her eyes opened wide as she accepted them with cupped hands.

"Three silver pieces?" she asked, looking up at me in astonishment.

"I've saved more than three silver pieces today, especially at that first store."

Mist clenched the silver pieces to her chest, looking uneasy.

"Th-thank you for your kindness. I'm a little taken aback by the amount; I never expected so much..."

She's just like my foster mother—honest to a fault.

"Don't worry about it."

Most of my money was taken from those four in the forest, anyway. Still got the pouch full of gemstones, too.

"Well then, I'll be going... Wh—?"

Mist stumbled forward, looking faint. I caught her in my arms as she fell.

She's so light. She should be as heavy as anybody else, but...she feels so small.

I looked down into her eyes, which were hazy and unfocused.

"Uhh..."

"Are you okay?"

She looked up at me.

"Ah—"

Her face was close to mine. Up close, it was easy to see the dark circles under her eyes.

“Oh!”

She quickly pushed herself away from me.

Just like she did with that angry guy in the square. She shut him down hard, too... Is there some reason she doesn't want anybody touching her?

Mist rearranged her hair in a hurry and let out a short sigh.

“Are you okay?” I asked again.

“—Eh?”

“You look exhausted. Are you getting enough sleep?”

“N-not really... I haven't slept well in days.”

Didn't she say she couldn't get a good night's sleep unless she had her own room? She isn't even sleeping well in that private room, huh? Is it insomnia, or something else?

“A-anyway, I'm fine. I'm just tired, that's all. I apologize for worrying you. I really must be going... I'm glad I could be of some assistance.”

She turned and walked away as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Like she's trying to avoid pulling me in.

As she disappeared into the crowd, Piggymaru gave a squeak.

“You wonder what we're going to do next?”

“Squee!”

I started walking.

“We're going into the Mils ruins, of course. No time to waste.”

I wonder if most ruins are walled off and managed like this.

The ruins were surrounded by a big fence. There was a building nearby, like a small fortress, with a stream of official-looking well-armed types walking in and out.

Do they stop the monsters from escaping up onto the surface?

When I stopped at the bag check before entering the ruins, I tried asking one of the inspectors.

“Why doesn't the Baron have his own soldiers explore the ruins?”

“Baron Hurkley does have a number of mercenaries as part of his personal guard, but this new level could be really dangerous. He probably doesn't want to lose good men down there.”

I have to give it to the Baron—mercenaries are disposable.

“I guess the visiting mercenaries see it as a path to promotion—a way to show their worth to the Baron, you know?” he said.

From wandering mercenary to a nobleman’s personal guard... Who wouldn’t take their chances in the ruins?

“You seem to know a lot about this kind of stuff.”

“Ha. You think so?” responded the inspector, unable to repress a smile.

Compliments usually work, huh? Like when the Goddess complimented Oyamada to win him over.

The inspector glanced around and lowered his voice to a whisper.

“I’ll let you in on a secret. Mapping out the new floor down there—even just where the monsters live and the general layout—could be really profitable for you. The early bird gets the worm, you know what I mean?”

So that’s how this works... I think I’m starting to get it. The first group goes down and gets information on the new level, then the stronger mercenaries come in and deal with the monsters. Once he knows most of the monsters are gone, the Baron will use his own personal guard to explore. Eventually they discover a new floor, and the cycle repeats. Brilliant.

“Hey, what’s this?”

He removed Piggymaru’s “crystal ball” from my bag.

“That’s a tool of my trade. Well, okay, I’m still just an apprentice,” I admitted, blushing for effect.

“A fortune-teller, eh? Good luck. I think you might have a knack for it.”

“Thank you.”

All right. Piggymaru’s through the bag check.

I passed the body check without any incident too.

My inspector finished making his notes.

“Be careful down there.”

“Thanks. I appreciate all the advice.”

During the check, I’d asked him all kinds of things about the ruins and gotten plenty of answers. The mercenaries were usually too arrogant and self-important to talk to the inspectors—but a little politeness won them over almost instantly.

I touched the walls of the ruins as I walked inside for the first time.

“Doesn’t seem like I’ll need the light from my pouch.” There were faintly glowing stones set into the rock around me, jutting out at strange angles, stretching out in a line down the ruins wall.

Underground pyroxene—dig it out of the walls and it loses its light. The inspector told me that it’s pretty common in the ruins, but it doesn’t grow everywhere. I’ll need to be able to provide my own light in some places.

“Grraaah!”

A monster’s roar echoed through the ruins, and two mercenaries ran down the hall, practically shoving me aside to get past.

“Aaah! A minotaur! Nobody told me there’d be minotaurs! It musta come up from the new floor!”

“We shouldn’t be here. It’s too dangerous!”

“Run!”

A moment later, a minotaur appeared in the shadowy hall, lumbering after them in pursuit.

It looks like a smaller version of the ones I saw in the Ruins of Disposal... Golden eyes, but none of the terrifying presence of the larger ones. This is nothing compared to the things I’ve already faced.

“Graah—Hff... Grrh?”

It emerged from the dark, shambling toward me.

Target locked, huh?

“Hff! Hff—! Grraahhh!”

A tentacle emerged from my robes.

“Squee!”

Here it comes, Piggymaru seemed to say.

“Yeah. I see it.”

Piggymaru’s in top form today. Perfect.

“Graaaaah—!”

The beast charged. I held my ground and extended my hand toward it.

“Paralyze.”

It froze.

“Hf—, Gr?! G... Gr...?”

“Poison.”

Paralysis and Poison applied.

I removed my shortsword from its scabbard and drove it into the minotaur's flesh. The blade sank easily into the beast's shoulder.

“Figures. The monsters from the Ruins of Disposal must be abnormally thick-skinned.”

I should be able to skin the monsters down here for leather.

I waited for the monster to die, wondering the whole time if the mercenaries that had been running away from it would return, but the hall remained empty. Eventually it breathed its last.

No level up. Not much EXP to be had, as expected.

As I stood up to leave, I heard shouting in the distance behind me. I quickly ducked around a corner.

“It's that way! The minotaur's over there! Please, do something!”

“Man, I hate finding stuff like this on the new floors!”

“Quit complaining and get used to it! It's always like this. The treasures'll make it worth it!”

Their footsteps stopped.

“It...it's dead...?”

“Some other mercs got to it first, huh?”

“No, look...there aren't any wounds on its body. Some kind of magic, you think?”

“Wait, look! There's a wound here.”

“Somebody took it down with a single blow from a shortsword?! Man, that's terrifying!”

It wasn't a single blow from a shortsword.

I hurried down the hallway and deeper into the ruins.

Having eyes in the back of my head is really useful. Back in the Ruins of Disposal, I was so scared of being ambushed that I was always on edge, sneaking around with my back to the wall...

“Squee, squee squee!”

“Safe to proceed!” Piggymaru seemed to say. At the edge of my vision, his tentacle flashed green at regular intervals—the sign for *all clear*. Thanks to Piggymaru, I could focus on whatever was in front of me. My ruins-clearing adventure was going well.

Most mercenaries have to buy themselves a map, but when the inspector realized I didn't have one, he'd winked and slipped one into my bag. Thanks to him, I had a good idea of which parts of the ruins had already been explored.

It'll be easy to find my way until we reach that new level...

He'd also given me a pen and ink with instructions to draw a map as I went and sell it to somebody when I was back up on the surface.

I have a lot to thank that inspector for.

The monsters in the Mills ruins were barely an inconvenience—nothing compared to the ones I'd met in the Ruins of Disposal. They were weak—I probably could've killed most of them with my shortsword alone. My stat modifiers were improving my overall strength and stamina.

I'd heard that there were basically two different kinds of monsters—ones that delve down to the bottom of the ruins and ones that try to climb up and out. It would be easier if there were some way of stopping these monsters from traveling between floors, but the ruins in Mills had no such barriers.

The strongest monsters were all gathered in the upper levels in the Ruins of Disposal too...

Strong monsters blocking the upper levels meant that the lower ones didn't get explored, so famous mercenaries would be called in to clear a path.

Some mercenaries don't want to spend time exploring but are happy to earn some coin by killing a few monsters, I guess.

This is all based on what the Baron said, though. I don't know how much is true. I really don't want to get involved with any mercs, anyway—I'm better off keeping my distance. I don't know enough about the magic systems of this world to answer any questions about my status effect skills, and there's always the risk they could discover Piggymaru. Plenty of reasons to stay away.

I headed down the passageway to a lower level.

"So this is floor six..."

The new floor is fifteen levels down, so there's still a long way to go.

I picked up the pace. These monsters were way weaker than I was used to, so I didn't want to slow down.

I mean, it doesn't really matter, but...I feel off about this. I have no idea how strong any of these monsters really are.

“Shhrraaa!”

Another one lunged at me from the dark.

“Paralyze.”

“O... Gh—”

“Poison.”

As they died, I dragged the poisoned monsters into a corner where I thought they wouldn't be discovered.

I don't want to draw the mercenaries' attention.

I chewed some dried meat and had a drink of water while I waited for another paralyzed monster to die.

The monsters in the Ruins of Disposal, the Soul Eater, the White Walkers...they were all actual threats. I even needed to put on a show for them to buy myself time to attack. But the monsters down here are like nothing.

“Nh?”

Piggymaru's warning tentacle turned red. I instinctively pressed my back to the wall, trying to disappear into the shadows. Soon, I heard footsteps and conversation nearby.

“—Hm? You're that guy who was shouting his head off in the square earlier, ain'tcha?” said a voice.

“I wasn't the one who started that conflict! It was that infernal woman!”

I poked my head around the corner to see what was going on.

His name was Monk, right? Weird name, but easy to remember.

Monk was speaking to two muscular men.

“What do you want?” one man demanded in a low, gravelly voice.

“I have a special favor to ask of you...”

The other man grinned, nodding his bald head and stroking his thick beard.

“We saw what happened earlier, y'know? Didn't think much of ya when I saw you up in the square! You're really somethin', though, taking down three ghouls at once without a scratch on ya! You're strong, eh?”

“Of course! I'm Monk 'The Flash' Droghetti, am I not?”

The bearded man looked like he was sizing Monk up.

“Yeah, I’ve heard that name before. Ain’t many in Ulza that know it, but you’re a big deal back in Bakoss, eh? What’re you doing in a backwater like Mils?”

“Oh? You know my name, do you? I knew you weren’t like those other ignorant mercenaries!”

“‘Course! None of those idiots have a freakin’ thing on us! So you got a job for us or what?”

“Yes. I will pay handsomely, if you do it right.”

“Heh heh... We’re in it for the money! Whaddya need?”

Monk began to cackle.

“That girl who humiliated me in the square... I want you to make her wish she’d never been born.”

Chapter 2: The Princess Knight

“**T**O BE CLEAR, you want us to kill her, right?”

“Yes, I want you to kill her.” Monk sounded annoyed at having to clarify.

“Hmph.”

The two men spoke quietly with each other, apparently considering their options. Monk quickly broke in to inform them of the reward. They changed their tune immediately.

“We’re in.”

“I want her to beg for her life before she dies—give her time to truly regret the way she treated me, you know?”

“We can have our *fun* with her before we kill her though, yeah?”

“Of course. So long as you capture her alive, you’re welcome to do whatever you want with her body.”

“Oh man, really?!”

“Be my guest! She wounded my pride! She assaulted my dignity with her contempt! Teach her the consequences of her actions! Break her apart!”

The bearded man looked delighted.

“This is sounding better by the minute. Even under that big cloak, I could tell she’s got quite the body...but she’s some kind of traveling warrior, ain’t she? How strong is this girl?”

“There’s no doubt she’s feisty...but she looked so tired, like she was about to fall over. I could take her by myself, of course, but on the off chance she surprises me, I thought I’d hire some help. I want this done *right*.”

The bearded man gave his axe a resolute swing.

“No little girl could beat us anyway! Not like we’re fighting the Goddess Vicius or nothin’!” He laughed heartily.

“She was tired, but I saw her hurrying through the ruins. She must be after the Dragon-Eye Cup... All she cares about is money, it seems!” said Monk. “Just another greedy whore. She’ll probably do anything for coin, eh?”

“How’s about this? We find that Dragon-Eye Cup first and pretend to offer it to her. Then we take her by surprise!”

“Th-that’s brilliant! You’re a freakin’ genius!”

“Then, when she’s begging for her life—we’ll take her prisoner!”

“We can sell her when we’re done with her. Bet we’ll get a good price for her, even with some wear and tear!”

“W-wait a minute now, my good men! You’re to *kill her*, mind! I hope that’s understood?” pressed Monk.

“Heh. You’re real pissed with her, ain’tcha?”

“Of course! She humiliated me, yet she’s still out there walking around with her nose up in the air! And then she acts like she’s completely forgotten about our encounter! Oh, it gets under my skin... she’s driving me crazy!” he spat furiously. “I-I won’t get a good night’s sleep u-until I see that smug face of hers twisted up in agony! She thinks she can take me lightly?! Me?! I-I won’t allow it! I’ll kill her and feed her to the monsters...I’ll watch as her pretty face is devoured by beasts!”

By the end, Monk was screaming, and the men looked taken aback.

“I mean, that’s all well and good, but...let us have some fun with her first, won’t you? It’d be a waste to just kill her so quick.”

“Sure, but as soon as you’re done with her, she’s monster food! She’s going to regret how she treated me!”

The men smiled tightly. They looked like they were already having serious doubts about Monk.

“Are you even paying attention? Go wait for her at the bottom of that staircase!” he ordered, pointing down into the caves in my direction. “I found the perfect place for an ambush!”

Didn’t he say he saw Mist on the upper floors? She’ll be coming down here soon...

I walked slowly out of the shadows. The bearded man saw me first.

“Huh? Who the heck are you? You listening in on us?!”

“Worthless. All of you.”

Monk glared at me with bloodshot eyes.

“What did you say?! Are you talking to me, boy?! I’ll kill you! No, I have a better idea. If you can’t respect your *superiors*, I’ll feed you to the monsters!!”

This guy is unhinged.

The two men reached for their weapons.

“Tch! Some stupid brat with a hero complex? Die quick for me, won’tcha?!”

“People die in these ruins all the time! We can cut off his arms and legs and let the monsters eat him alive!”

I reached out a hand toward them.

“Wait a minute,” I said.

“What?!”

“I’m sorry. Please, forgive me.”

“Pfft! You’re begging for your life already? Pathetic! Can’t back up your big mouth, huh?”

“Paralyze.”

They froze.

“Wh— hh— Nhh...?”

“Wha— the...? I can’t... Move...?”

These guys are so much weaker than the four I faced in the forest. I can tell just by how they respond to my Paralyze skill. It was way too easy to trick them—why did I even bother?

“H-how...?” struggled Monk, his eyes bulging, frozen wide open in shock. “What did...y-you do...?”

“Who knows? Anyway...”

I walked over to Monk and whispered in his ear.

“You’re going to *kill me*, are you?”

He gave a stifled shriek.

“Wh-wh... Who are y...ou? You’re just...some dumb...w-weakling...”

“Heh, sorry. Did I surprise you?”

My inner bad guy bubbled to the top.

“Exterminating scum like you...it feels kinda good. I could get used to this.”

“Huh?”

That’s not all, of course...I owe Mist a favor for helping me out earlier, and it’s not like I was gonna side with these guys over her. But it’s not a question of right and wrong. Too-ka Mimori is nobody’s friend, and nobody decides anything for him. I do what I want.

“People die all the time in these ruins, don’t they?”

Multiple targets acquired.

“Poison.”

“Uh... Gh... Wh—?! Wha...?”

“I-it burns...”

“H-he...lp...”

Monk stared at me with intense, hate-filled eyes.

“Y-you’re... going t-to... regret th...is...”

“Ha ha ha, are you braindead or what? You think I’m going to let you live?” I laughed and gave my most twisted smile. “I’m going to crush you. Right here, right now.”

You tried to kill me, so I’ll return the favor.

“Ghh?! Nh...”

I noticed several monsters slowly creeping closer.

Good enough.

I turned to walk away.

“Looks like *you’re* gonna be monster food.”



I heard the attack cries of the monsters behind me as I took the staircase down to the next floor.

“Geh!”

“Geh-geh!”

“Gyogah!”

For a moment, the noises stopped—then they started up again, even more frenzied.

“Kyah Shyaaaaa—!”

Guess they found Monk and his friends. I wonder whether the poison killed them, or if the monsters got them first.

I heard a faint scream in the dark. Piggymaru stuck out a tentacle in my direction.

“Squee!”

The slime seemed angry with the three guys we’d just met.

“Harsh, but fair,” I said.

“Squee!”

I sat down in the dark and began rearranging my stuff.

“Sque-sque-sque? Squee!”

A warning.

The monsters had finished their meal and were coming this way. Did they catch my scent?

“Looks like they’re still hungry.”

“Gyaaaah!”

I fired off my usual combo at every monster that came around the corner. They all went down quickly.

“Gh— Gyo—?”

Doesn’t seem like eating Monk poisoned them...I guess my Poison skill is only poisonous to the target itself?

When I returned to see what had become of Monk and his cronies, they had all been devoured. Only blood-spattered bits remained, deep red stains that seeped into the ground. Their coin purses were split, silver spilled out across the gruesome scene.

I should leave the money...it’s got blood all over it. The inspectors upstairs might check my coin when I’m leaving this place. It’d take ages to clean them off one by one...besides, I have money to spare.

I left what remained of their bodies untouched and returned to

the monsters I'd just poisoned. They were still alive, at least for the moment.

I don't want to wait for them to die.

I walked up to each monster and slit their throats one by one.

Did that get me any experience points? I haven't leveled up once since I got to this place...I guess they just don't give much EXP. It's not worth it to go out of my way to kill them.

I continued down to the next floor.

From what I've seen of these ruins, a single floor isn't that big a deal—they're almost small. The Ruins of Disposal might be messing with my sense of scale.

I kept killing monsters with my usual combo and moved quickly through the ruins. Since it had a shorter range than Paralyze, I saved my Sleep skill for reapplication. The range on Paralyze was around 20 meters, suited for long-range attacks, so I invariably used it as my first strike.

I'm reapplying Sleep to targets when I have time...I really want to get that skill to level 3 soon.

The deeper into the ruins I went, the fewer mercenaries I encountered. I stopped a moment and leaned against a wall to check my MP.

MP: +58517 / 59037

No need to worry about running out, then...

I'd woken up that morning with full MP and realized that it had regenerated in my sleep. It seemed that it had to be a pretty substantial rest, though—no uncomfortable naps like the ones that got me through the Ruins of Disposal.

I was levelling up so regularly that I never had to worry about MP. But if I'm getting it back every time I get a full night's sleep, it gives me a lot more leeway—I can use as much mana as I need.

I checked the pocket watch I'd bought with Mist.

"Time for a break."

"Squee!"

There were break rooms built by past mercenaries and soldiers scattered throughout the ruins. Sometimes, kind souls had even left them stocked with food and drink. Unfortunately, the rooms had a

tendency to be infested by monsters and humans alike before I got there. On the tenth floor, I headed to a break room that was marked on my map, but when I approached, I heard voices from inside. *People.* I tasked Piggymaru with watching my back and crouched down to listen.

“Tenth floor already, and we’re not even breaking a sweat!”

“Always good to make it down first in a ruins clearing, eh? We’re kicking their butts, and we even have time for a rest!”

“It’s ’cause we’re the best hunters! I can take down any of the monsters from that new floor—just let me at ’em!”

Did they head down right after the Baron’s announcement?

“Listen up, that Dragon-Eye Cup is ours! That thing belongs to the Sabre-Toothed Tigers!”

“Heck yeah!”

“Just five more floors to go before we’re in unexplored territory! We’ll rest here a little longer, then get a move on. Sound good?” That voice sounded female.

“Whatever you say, Boss!”

Sounds like they’ll be here a while. What do I do? I’d rather stay on my own. There’s no way I can rest with these guys around—I’ll have to keep my guard up the whole time.

Yeah...I’ll find myself another break room.

I made my way down another three levels before I found an empty break room. The map wasn’t as complete this far down, so I wandered around until I found the break room mark painted on the wall.

“Grrrgh!”

“Hff!”

Infested with monsters. Fourteen of them. Definitely can’t rest with those there.

Multiple targets acquired.

“Paralyze.”

“Grrgh?! Gh...?”

“Poison.” I had finished off the monsters but created a new problem for myself. “I’m going to need to move these corpses.”

Some of them are big.

I decided to try my luck with floor fourteen instead. After

searching for a long time, killing monsters as I went, I gave up.

“Nothing else for it, huh?”

I returned to the break room on thirteen and grudgingly cleared out the monster corpses.

“Will you watch my back while I’m asleep?”

“Squee!”

I’m lucky to have Piggymaru to keep guard. In the Ruins of Disposal, I was so anxious I could barely sleep...

I settled back against the wall and let my eyes close.

When I woke up, I checked my watch.

“I’ve been asleep for almost three hours...”

“Squee!”

Out came Piggymaru’s tentacle, snapping to attention to inform me that nothing had happened while I was sleeping.

“Thanks. Um, don’t you need to sleep yourself, Piggymaru?”

“Squee!”

“Okay, but if you want to sleep, just say the word, okay? We don’t need to race to get this Dragon-Eye Cup or whatever. We’re in no rush, okay?”

“Squee. ♪”

I’ve never seen Piggymaru sleep... I wonder if slimes sleep at all?

When I asked earlier, Piggymaru responded with a “squee?” Not exactly a yes or a no... I puzzled over it as we ate a meal of dried meat together.

There’s still so much I don’t know about slimes.

“Squee~! ♪ Squeesquee~! ♪ Munch munch! ♪”

It’s eating that meat happily enough, though... I guess slimes have appetites just like everybody else.

My hunger satisfied, I left the break room and headed back down to floor fourteen.

As soon as I reached that floor, a man approached me from the gloom with a band of mercenaries trailing behind. I reached for my weapons—they don’t look hostile, but you never know.

“Hey, you!”

That voice... He’s one of the guys I heard in the break room earlier.

Humble and polite mode: activate.

“Hello! What can I do for you?”

“There’s something happening down here.”

“Happening how? What’s wrong?”

The Sabre-Toothed Tigers assembled themselves in front of me. *They look scared—what could’ve happened?*

“Tch—we were so close to that new floor, too!” said a red-haired girl resentfully.

“There’s something terrible going on... Even the guys from the upper floors have noticed it,” said a deeply tanned man, looking back over his shoulder.

I only slept for three hours...something must’ve happened in that time. It doesn’t look like they’re lying. They seem genuinely freaked out.

“Can you be a little more specific?” I asked hesitantly. “This is my first time down here.”

“The monsters are all dead.”

“Dead...?”

“Yeah. It’s weird... They’re just— We have no idea why. The corpses look untouched, not a scratch on them. Some are a little discolored, but no wounds...”

Oh.

The red-haired girl picked up the story.

“It’s not just the weak ones! The strong ones, too. We were the first ones down here, and the floor’s full of them. What could’ve done that?!”

I...actually have a pretty good idea...

“We met a guy from the upper floors who found similar corpses upstairs, but we didn’t find any on our way down,” the red-haired girl continued. “So whatever it is, it happened in the past few hours.”

The mercenaries began to talk among themselves.

“Some kinda poison fog from deep in the ruins, you think? Climbing slowly up the floors.”

“No human victims so far, though...but maybe it takes longer to kill us? It’s gotta be some kind of death fog, I think.”

“You think that story about the king’s curse on the Dragon-Eye Cup was true?”

“Nobody told me there’d be poison fog down here.” The red-

haired girl crossed her arms and glared at her fellow mercenaries.

“My Sabre-Toothed Tiger family is more important to me than any of this. I’m not going to risk leading my group to their deaths. It sucks, but we’re turning back... We need to figure out what’s going on down here.”

The tanned man nodded slowly.

“If you happen to meet any other mercenaries, can you let them know what’s happening? They can make their own decisions about whether to keep going, but...they really need to know about this.”

“I will, thank you,” I replied.

“I know it’s not my place to order you around, but you should head back, too. Let’s leave this to the Baron’s guys, huh? He wants that cup so badly, he can come down and get it for himself.”

I smiled politely.

“Thank you for your concern, really.”

“So, what, you’re alone down here? Not much armor on you.”

Oh. He’s suspicious that I’m down here alone with just my shortsword and hammer.

“I’ve got friends nearby.”

I held up my backpack for him to see.

“I’m just here to skin the monsters, collect ingredients, that kind of thing. I was running away from some monsters and got separated from my group... I never expected to make it all the way down here.”

I guess if push comes to shove, I can give them Mist’s name.

“You ended up down here by accident? We’ll take you back up to the surface with us if you want.”

“Thanks, but I think I’m good. I can’t leave without my friends.”

The mercenary who’d offered looked concerned.

“All right. But be careful, okay?”

“I will.”

“We really need to get out of here. Sorry we can’t help you find your friends.”

“It’s fine. Thanks so much for giving me a heads-up.”

They headed back toward the higher levels, and I made my way across floor fourteen.

“Squee?” came Piggymaru’s voice.

“Yeah, I heard. They’re talking about the monsters I killed.”

I didn’t have time to hide the corpses or make them look normal—there were just too many of them. Well, this could all work to my advantage anyway. Once this news spreads, I won’t have to deal with so many mercs down here. I don’t want anybody seeing me use my skills.

“This might be a blessing in disguise...”

I started searching for floor fifteen.

There aren’t many glowing crystals in the walls this far down... Well, that’s not a problem for me, at least. Compared to the Ruins of Disposal, this place is heaven.

“I’ve got this thing with me, after all.”

I took out my leather pouch and poured mana into it. Now that I had a backpack, I could keep my pouch empty, making it much easier to carry around.

This floor seems empty in both directions...

This level was quiet and seemed empty. I poked around, searching for a way down, but didn’t find anything—it must have been hidden somehow. Taking advantage of the solitude, I pulled out the paper and started to sketch out a simple map—things that would be useful to me, but I didn’t have time to be the Baron’s cartographer. When I got to filling in information about the monsters I’d found, I paused. I didn’t know the actual names of any of the creatures I’d come across, and also, they were all dead now. I put my pen away—this would have to be good enough.

Suddenly, Piggymaru snapped to attention.

“Squee!”

A small tentacle directed me to turn around just as a horde of reverse-centaur monsters—horse heads, human bodies—rushed around the corner.

“Neeeeeeighhhh!”

I fired off the same old combo.

Paralysis.

Poison.

Nothing in here to challenge me yet.

I turned and walked away from the heap of dying monsters.

“Hmph. Boring. This is a waste of time.”

“Squee!”

Finally, we found the dark, narrow passage to the new floor and ventured into uncharted territory.

Floor fifteen was all ruined buildings that looked like they had once made up a residential area. There were large rooms filled with great metal shelves, and I helped myself to small objects and jewels as I went.

I want to leave enough space in my bag for ingredients.

I left the residential area and headed onward. I came out into a high-ceilinged hallway with a large, ornate door on the far side.

There's definitely something behind that door...no point waiting around.

“Okay, Piggymaru. Let's do this.”

I approached the grand door and pushed it, hard, with both hands. It stuck for a moment, then gave way and swung open violently. I dashed into the room and flattened myself against the wall.

I can't let the enemy see me yet—it's too dangerous. I need to watch and wait. I remember the Soul Eater's laser attack...

I carefully inspected my surroundings.

It appeared to be a temple of some kind. There were light crystals at regular intervals along the walls, and the air was thick with dust. The contrast between the black walls and clear white light was beautiful to behold. *A lot of work must have gone into this place.*

In the far corner of the room there was a statue of what I could only describe as a humanoid dragon.

A big stone statue? Wait a minute...a dragon-person statue? There's an altar in front of it, too. I wonder...

I looked at the altar more closely.

There's a cup enshrined in a place of honor on the altar, glittering with gemstones. It drew my attention like a magnet.

“So that's the Dragon-Eye Cup...?”

So, I've found what everybody's looking for. No sign of any monsters, either. Even Piggymaru seems relaxed—for now.

I walked slowly toward the altar, looking up at the towering stone statue.

“That thing's going to come alive, isn't it?”

Anybody who's ever read a book or seen a movie would have the same feeling about this statue—touch the treasure, and the trap comes to

life. It's too obvious.

I should strike first.

I reached an arm out toward the statue.

“Paralyze!”

The statue began to change color as life kindled beneath the stone scales of the dragon-man. Piggymaru reacted immediately.

“Squee? Squee!”

“Guaaaaaaarrrr! Shaaaaa!”

I felt the monster's desire to attack heavy in the air, its presence looming over me, but...

You're too late.

“Gr—?!”

The monster was paralyzed, only half awake from its stone sleep.

Poison.

The great dragon-man turned purple.

“Grr, Ghh...?! Gh... Grra—!”

It tried to thrash around but only managed a few twitches of its head. It was desperately trying to shoot something out of its mouth, but...

Try to move when you're paralyzed, and you're only making my job easier.

Thick, inky blood came spurting out of the monster's ears and mouth.

“Gr— Gh—”

A gruesome sound filled the air as the dragon-man's head twisted clean off its body and came crashing down to the floor, its tongue lolling out of its mouth as it landed. I jumped back as the rest of the statue crumbled, falling to the temple floor in great chunks of stone.

“The Soul Eater disguised itself as a stone statue, too... At least this one wasn't so fast that I couldn't react.”

I picked up the Dragon-Eye Cup.

“So this silver cup is the grand prize, huh?”

The cup was shaped like a great dragon's claw standing upright. It seemed to change color based on your perspective—sometimes silver, then the light would hit it differently and it would look purple.

The gold gemstones set into it gleamed like a dragon's eyes. I wiped the dirt from its surface, and even in the dim underground light, it practically glowed.

"Beautiful."

All right, what's next...hm?

"Squee!"

I sensed someone behind me. I rushed to shelter behind the altar and raised my hand toward the threat.

"It's you!"

A familiar face stood in the doorway. Perhaps she hadn't heard from the other mercenaries what was happening in the ruins—or maybe, like me, she saw it as a good opportunity and continued her descent. Her expression softened when she recognized me.

"Oh, it's you, then."

Mist Balukas.

The visor that was usually on her forehead was pulled down and projected a beam of light in front of her. As she entered the room, the beam faded away.

I don't see any armor—did she leave it behind? She doesn't look right, somehow, wandering underground ruins with all these terrible monsters. She should be wearing a dress in some royal palace.

Mist looked down at the floor, squeezing her left arm like she was holding something in.

"All the other mercenaries were turning back... I assumed I would be the first one here."

So I was right—she heard what was happening and took the risk anyway.

Mist raised her eyebrows and forced a smile.

"I took a break after encountering a horde of monsters, and that delayed my progress through the ruins," she said, sounding uncomfortable and angry with herself.

Self-discipline, I suppose? She seems really hard on herself.

"I'll give you this cup if you want it."

"Eh?" she raised her head, dumbfounded. "Wh-what did you just say...?"

"I'll give you the cup if you want it."

"Wh-what would you ask in return?"

“In return?”

“For three hundred gold pieces, all I could give you would be...” Mist looked down at her waist, where her hand was resting on the sword in its scabbard. “I could offer this sword, but it wouldn’t be a fair trade. Is there anything I could do for you that would be worth three hundred gold pieces, Sir Hati?”

Mist laid a hand across her chest like a knight swearing allegiance.

“If it’s in my power, I swear I will do my best to fulfill your request.”

I moved closer to her.

“You’ll do anything I ask of you?”

Mist swallowed, looking to the side a little uncomfortably.

“F-first...might I hear your request? I cannot give my word without knowing whether or not it I’ll be able to keep it.”

“Here.”

I held out the cup toward her.

“What? Oh, b-but...” Mist looked puzzled.

“Just take it.”

I tossed the cup toward her, and she fumbled to catch it.

“B-but... Sir Hati, I haven’t heard what you want of me in return for—”

“I don’t want anything,” I interrupted.

“I-I have my own code to consider! I’ll carry your bags, prepare food, serve as your personal guard...I beg of you, name your price!”

Well, if you’re going to beg... Nobody actually takes their pride that seriously, do they? I’m sure she doesn’t mean it.

“You’re in a hurry, aren’t you? You should get going.” I turned my back on her. “See you.”

“Wait! I can’t allow you to just give me the cup like this!”

“What can I say? I’m a nice guy—especially to beautiful girls.”

“Y-you’re lying!”

“What?!”

“I’m sorry, but...”

Oh, right. She can see through lies.

I took a deep breath.

“I’m not actually here for the Dragon-Eye Cup. There’s a monster down here somewhere, and that’s what I’m after.”

“We were told that this new floor only contains the Dragon-Eye Cup.”

“I found an old document that says different. There’s a monster down here, and it has something I need. The ruins clearing was a lucky coincidence.”

Mist looked surprised.

“Well, that explains some things. Even so, I—”

“I don’t need the money right now. I don’t particularly want the Dragon-Eye Cup, either.”

But I had another reason for wanting to offload it.

The Baron’s been searching like crazy for this thing for years, hasn’t he? If I show up, the hero of the ruins who brought him this treasure, I’ll draw way too much attention. Mist seems to need the money—convenient for both of us.

I thought back to what the Great Sage had scribbled in the margins of *Forbidden Arts: The Complete Works*.

In the room with the altar and the stone statue...yeah. There should be a hidden staircase in here somewhere.

I knelt down to inspect the altar and felt around the edges until...

Oh, a button! I’ll push this, and...

“Excuse me.”

Hm? Why is she still here?

I stood back up. “What’s wrong?”

“Are you going further down? Are there more floors to this place?” she asked.

“Yeah...don’t tell the Baron, okay? I don’t want to have to explain all this to him. That can be how you pay me back for the Dragon-Eye Cup.”

“Understood.”

“But didn’t you hear about the mysterious danger on the upper floors?”

“Word did reach me, but...I thought it might be a good opportunity to get ahead.”

As I expected.

“Most of the mercenaries retreated once they learned that even the Sabre-Toothed Tigers had given up,” she said. Those guys must’ve had quite the reputation.

“Sir Hati, will you at least allow me to accompany you as your bodyguard?” Mist asked.

“What...?”

“I can carry your bags if that’s all you require. But you’re entering an unexplored floor, and many dangers will await you down there. From what I gather, you’re a mage of some sort, and you must be tired from casting so much. I have some confidence in my abilities with a sword. I can surely make your job a little easier and help carry the load. I swear I will not become a burden to you.”

Mist drew closer and looked up at me, her face serious.

“Will you accept?”

Tired from casting? Oh, she must assume I’m getting low on MP. That won’t be a problem for me any time soon, though.

“Ugh... Look, I’m sorry, okay?”

Mist pulled away, dejected.

“Then I’m afraid I can’t take this cup—certainly not for nothing.” She eyed the head of the dragon monster where it lay crumbling on the floor. “After all, you were the one who defeated this monster.”

“If you need something from the corpse, go ahead and take it,” I offered.

“Th-that’s not what I meant!”

Maybe the lack of sleep is messing with her head or something.

“Aren’t you in a hurry?” I asked.

Mist stopped to think for a moment.

“With the Dragon-Eyed Cup, all of my concerns about money would be eliminated. It would greatly speed up my journey to never have to worry about travel expenses again. A few days’ delay will be of no great import.”

She’s not backing down... She’s stubborn, and bound by what she feels are her obligations to others.

And she’s a swordswoman, huh? I wouldn’t mind having somebody out in front, just in case anything gets too close...it’d also be a good opportunity to ask her things about this world.

Piggymaru, reading the room, stayed silent.

“I have a few conditions.”

“Go ahead.”

“No questions about my personal life. You’ll be my bodyguard, and I’ll be guarded—that’s where our relationship ends.”

“Completely understood.”

“There’s also no guarantee we’ll be back up to the surface soon—if you have to head back by yourself, that’s your responsibility, not mine. If those conditions sound reasonable, I’ll take you on.”

“Thank you,” she said, looking relieved. She quickly regained her composure. “By my honor, I swear to protect you, Sir Hati, even if it means my life!”

Those dark rings under her eyes still bother me. She looks pale, too. Lack of sleep, maybe?

“...”

Maybe I should use my Sleep skill on her at some point to help her rest.

I pushed the button under the altar, which closed the door at the far end of the hall—just as the Great Sage wrote. After the door scraped shut, the altar split in half, revealing a staircase.

“A staircase...under the altar?” said Mist, staring wide-eyed at the hole that had appeared.

“Don’t tell the Baron about anything we find down here. You don’t want to start any trouble with him, do you?”

“Of course. I won’t say a word.”

The staircase was wide enough for us to walk down side by side. I held up my leather pouch to light the way.

“What a strange lantern,” remarked Mist cautiously.

I guess she’s worried about asking personal questions—she did promise not to.

“Not something you see every day, huh? It’s important to me.”

That wasn’t a lie.

Mist touched her visor, activating the beam on her forehead to light the way forward.

“Do a lot of people have visors like yours?” I asked.

“No, I don’t think they’re very common.”

At the bottom of the staircase, we found a ruined corridor stretching out into the dark.

Nothing like the endless sprawling caves of the Ruins of Disposal... this place was clearly built to be lived in.

“No monsters so far.”

“Sir Hati, actually, I—”

“Yes?”

“Ah...it’s nothing. Please, don’t worry about it.”

What do you mean, “it’s nothing”? It’s obviously something. Whatever. She was probably about to ask a question and thought better of it.

We continued walking.

It’s hardly a labyrinth, but I should try to remember where we’ve been.

As we continued down the corridor, Piggymaru slid around to my side and silently motioned that something was coming—*monster nearby.*

It burst around a corner ahead of us, letting out a battle cry as it charged. I had never seen this kind of monster before—its head reminded me of a flower bud with three goggling golden eyes set on the outside, but its body appeared human. *This is way more unsettling than any of the things on the upper floors.*

Mist drew her sword and moved in to cover me.

“Leave this to me, Sir Hati.”

The monster’s head opened wide like a flower in bloom, and several long tentacles shot out in Mist’s direction.

Slice! Slash! Slice—!

She cut them down one by one, moving forward as she did with elegant, precise footwork. She closed in on the monster before I even knew what was happening.

Swoosh!

With a single stroke, she split it in two.

“Hh-gheeehh—!”

The monster let out a final cry, then fell silent. Mist wiped the blood from her sword and returned it to her scabbard. I almost wanted to applaud.

“Nice work.”

Mist gave a short bow. “Not at all.”

Hmm, so this is what it’s like to have a frontline fighter on my side.

It'll be nice to have someone like her watching my back. Piggymaru's a great lookout but really lacking in combat ability. I could get used to having a bodyguard.

"Let us continue, Sir Hati."

"Sure."

The lower floors were bigger than the upper ones, but also much simpler—less like mazes. There were several landmark-like wall decorations and pillars that kept us from getting lost.

"By the way," I said as we walked down another long corridor.

"Yes?"

"I want to ask about monsters. What's the difference between the normal monsters and the ones with gold eyes?"

"Golden-eyed monsters are said to provide more experience points," Mist replied with hesitation. "People on the continent sometimes call it soul power, because they believe you absorb the soul of the monster you kill."

So she knows what experience points are.

"The Heroes from Another World can use these monsters to level up—improve their abilities and strengths. Have you heard of the heroes?"

"Some stories, yeah."

Experience points. Leveling up. Seems like the mechanics of us heroes are pretty well known.

"It's said that the heroes do not gain experience points from killing other humans, only monsters."

Those four guys in the forest looked really experienced, but I didn't level up at all after killing them—it makes sense if humans don't give experience at all. It's probably a good thing, too. Otherwise, heroes might go on murder sprees to improve their stats. This world's most famous heroes could be sacrificed to level us up...that sounds like something the foul Goddess would do if she could.

"So, these golden-eyed monsters are an important source of EXP?" I asked.

"Yes. A time long ago, the heroes overhunted and greatly reduced the population. They even came into conflict with each other over who got to kill the dwindling number of monsters. That eventually drove the remaining monsters underground, into the ruins."

I suppose from the monsters' perspectives, we're mass murderers.

“And that’s why so many golden-eyed monsters live underground like this?”

“So it is said. Though many of them have also fled to the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters.”

The monsters ran from us heroes and found their way underground to create dungeons.

“Occasionally monsters venture out of the ruins. Wherever possible, there are groups set up to manage them and keep watch at the exit,” explained Mist.

“Couldn’t they just seal them up for good?”

“Seal them in, and the monsters will just dig their way out some other way. At least with just one exit, we know where they’ll emerge and can manage the risk.”

The Ruins of Disposal were completely sealed, though...

Like she’d read my mind, Mist answered my unspoken question. “I have heard tales of powerful ruins that were closed up by the gods so the monsters inside can never escape, but if those ruins exist at all, they are few and far between, and they don’t require any real management.”

I guess only a god—or a Goddess—could pull it off.

“What about the monsters that don’t have golden eyes?” I asked.

“They’re just regular old monsters.”

Regular for you, sure.

“Some monsters are friendly to humans,” she continued. “Golden-eyes are notoriously aggressive, but there are plenty of peaceful monsters out there.”

“But is there anything special about these golden-eyes?”

“Are you aware of Demon King essence?”

“I’ve heard of it, yes.”

That foul Goddess explained it to us just after our summoning—it’s special mana that the Demon King’s army uses, I think?

“It’s said that if the Root of All Evil ever appears in this world, Demon King essence will wreak havoc across the whole continent. The legends speak of monsters who absorb it, and their eyes are turned gold by terrible influence. The essence unlocks the strength and aggression that lies within each monster—though peaceful, docile ones aren’t affected at all. This is all just a theory, though it was passed down by no less than the Great Sage Anglin.”

I should've expected to hear his name again.

"The Great Sage was friends with some monsters. He had a special fondness for slimes."

"..."

"Is something the matter?"

"I'm thinking, that's all."

"Oh?"

I looked down at my robes.

Maybe I should just show Piggymaru to Mist after all. Still...

"..."

Golden-eyed monsters.

Gold.

The golden hero—Kiriara Takuto.

Maybe I'm overthinking it, but...golden monsters, golden hero...
I have a terrible feeling that there's a link between them.

SOGOY AYAKA SWUNG her flail hard into the skeleton's flank. The impact was dull and heavy, and it sent sharp pain running through her wrists. Ayaka retreated and raised her weapon again. The skeleton froze for a second, then crumbled to the ground. She wiped the sweat from her forehead.

“Hah...”

The Goddess had sent them to the ancient Enchanted Bone Ruins on the outskirts of the Kingdom of Alion to train. She wanted them to get used to real fighting, she'd said, and gain experience points. The ruins were filled with monsters, apparently, and she warned them not to go deeper than the first underground floor of any ruins they discovered. In this area, though, enough monsters walked the forests that there was no need to venture into the ruins at all. The Goddess told them to run if they encountered any horned monsters—“skeleton knights,” she had called them. The forest was overrun with undead enemies, most of which were known as skull-types. Ayaka had been horrified to see bones moving around on their own the first few times, but...she'd gotten used to it.

She retrieved her spear from the rubble it was standing in and returned it to the leather sleeve on her back. Her flail was much more effective here—crushing the bones was easier than trying to cut through them. Her Kisou style of ancient martial arts was built for the battlefield and intended to adapt to any situation. Its main focus was the spear, but sometimes that wasn't the right weapon for the job.

This is the first time I've ever used anything like a flail, though. It's a little like the chain sickle, but the impact and weight are completely different.

“You're naturally talented, Ayaka, but you were born into a time and a place where these weapons simply aren't needed anymore. Is that a blessing or a curse? I can't say...”

My grandmother said that to me. I need these skills now more than ever, Grandmother...

“Ksheeeee—!”

A skeleton with a shortsword leaped out from the darkness. *They can use human weapons? Do they retain memories from when they were alive?*

Ayaka waited for the right time to strike, then stepped forward, swinging the flail around and crushing the monster's ribs to splinters.

Crunch! Snap!

Level up!

Level 4 → Level 5

She checked her stats.

I still can't use my unique skills...

Ayaka stood alone in the forest ruins. Thick green leaves cast dappled shadows in the afternoon sunlight.

2-C had already divided itself into groups.

Kirihara Takuto's group was all elites, and as an S-class, he was their leader. He was followed by A-class Oyamada Shougo and a number of other heroes, all B-class or higher.

Ikusaba Asagi was the head of a large group, but their strongest heroes were only B-class. Her group was exclusively female—most of the girls had joined her when things went south. Ayaka seemed strangely fixated on Kashima Kobato, who'd joined her group.

I hope Kashima-san's doing okay...

Yasu Tomohiro's group was filled with outcasts, anybody that had been turned away from Ikusaba and Kirihara's circles. They had two C-class heroes, but the rest were D-class. They seemed to hope that A-class Yasu could save them from what was to come. Since Ikusaba had taken the girls, Yasu's group was entirely male.

Then there were the Takao sisters, S-class and A-class. They weren't a group, exactly—more of a pair—and they stuck together the same way they always had. The other students actively avoided them.

They were teleported into another world, but it's like they're completely unfazed by everything.

Ayaka resolved to learn from their example.

2-C's homeroom teacher, Zakurogi, was still waiting in the Goddess Vicius's castle, along with all the other students who hadn't passed the initiation ceremony.

Finally, there was Sogou Ayaka. She had defied the Goddess, and everybody knew it. Nobody wanted to work with her and risk holy wrath.

This is just how things are; no point getting upset about it. I was only doing what I thought was right...if solitude is my reward for that, I'm fine with it.

“Wait up! I said *wait*, you freakin’ sack of bones!”

“C’mon! Get back here!”

“Hey, bony! You’re already dead, ain’tcha?! So who cares if I kill you again, huh?”

Ayaka recognized the familiar voices of Kirihara’s group long before they charged out of the brush in their new other-world clothes.

“What?! That bony bastard’s already crushed!” a boy said.

“What the heck, Ayaka? You stole our kill!” the girl beside him complained.

“Huh?”

“That’s, like, so mean! That was *our* bony!” she protested.

“You should ask permission first,” another boy cut in. “Man, I feel like an idiot for running all this way!”

“Just ’cause you were class rep doesn’t mean you can steal other people’s kills!”

Kirihara’s group kept complaining as Oyamada burst out from the trees.

“What have we here?! Ayaka-sensei, all on her lonesome?! You wound me, Ayaka, you really do~! Illegal huntin’ in *our* territory?”

Oyamada tapped her shoulder with the flat of his greatsword. It felt like a threat.

Your territory?

She looked down at the ground to see a thin line traced in the dirt.

“These are *our* hunting grounds, you got that? You’re an outsider, Ayaka-sensei! You ain’t one of us! It’s basically criminal for you to hunt here. Class leader to convict? So uncool~!”

“That’s enough, Shougo,” said Kirihara, stepping out from the trees wearing a long hooded cloak. He looked like something out of a fantasy movie, or maybe an anime villain.

“Hey, you’re not the boss of me! You makin’ excuses for her now?!” Oyamada shot back angrily.

“Sogou’s still an S-class. You A-class heroes can whine at her all you like, but she could take you all down in an instant. That’s why she stole your kill—it’s how little she thinks of you,” said Kirihara, shaking his head.

“But I didn’t mean to—”

“Enough,” said Kirihara, raising his hand to silence her. “I’ve heard it all from Vicius.”

“You heard...what, exactly?” asked Akaya.

“You’re mentally unstable. Your little outburst when we disposed of that E-class trash...you were so stressed that you snapped. Don’t worry, I understand.”

Kirihara stepped toward her, leaving his group behind.

“You’re still confused. You’re so overwhelmed that you barely have any idea what you’re doing, do you?”

“Is that really what you see when you look at me?” asked Ayaka.

“I’m scared of you, Sogou. That’s all.”

“What?”

Scared of me?

“You were so sensible—the core of the class. But getting teleported to this other world really did a number on you, huh? It’s like you’ve gone insane.”

“Listen, Kirihara-kun. I just don’t trust the Goddess, and I think we should—”

“No, Sogou. You listen to me,” he interrupted, patting her on the arm. “From the second you refused to join our group, I knew you were too far gone.”

The rest of them looked on, pity in their eyes.

“Kirihara...kun.”

“But you’re an S-class. You’re *valuable*. But you can’t think rationally anymore. It’s a shame, it really is.”

Kirihara turned to walk away, then stopped suddenly and looked up at the sky.

“If I’m the king, you’ll obviously never be my queen, but maybe you could be an adequate knight. Defend me with your life and all that.”

He turned to look back at her, his expression smug and self-assured.

“I’m waiting for the day you wake up and serve me as you should—but I don’t hold out much hope, Sogou Ayaka.”

Oyamada laughed loudly.

“What a rollercoaster! 2-C class hero to zero in the blink of an eye!” he declared.

The other group members looked on, all of them suddenly smugly superior.

“I don’t really get it~! Sogou can just use her special martial arts, right?”

“Couldn’t she, like, take down the Demon King all by herself?!”

“For sure, yeah! The Goddess took her down in one hit, but that had to be a fluke!”

“Sogou-san, you’re so strong~! Fighting against the Goddess all by yourself? We could never do that!”

Ayaka shook her head and turned to walk away.

“Hey, Ayaka,” Oyamada called after her.

“What is it?”

“Give us some money, and we might let you use our hunting spot for a while. Ikusaba and the others already paid their fee. Whaddya say?”

Oh. That’s why Kiri-hara’s group let them stay.

“I don’t have much.”

“Huh?” Oyamada looked taken aback. “What about your pocket money from the Goddess?”

“She never gave me any.”

“Seriously?! Wow, she must *really* hate you! Poor thing!”

Ayaka’s hand clenched into a fist.

I still don’t regret speaking out.

“Waaaah!”

A scream in the woods. Ayaka spun around to see shapes coming toward them—a group of her fellow classmates, stumbling over themselves to get away from something.

“I-it’s here! It’s here! Aaaaah!”

Asagi Ikusaba’s group.

“Wh-what the heck?!”

Kiri-hara’s group readied their weapons as Ikusaba dashed out from the forest, almost bowling them over as she ran.

“You idiots! Take the hint already! The horned ones are here!”

Skeleton knights?!

Ayaka tightened her grip on her flail.

“Aah!”

Behind the others, Kashima Kobato was helping a girl with an injured leg slowly limp from the forest.

“Aah...haa...I can’t believe th-that...Kobato’s...saving me...” the girl whimpered.

“Don’t worry, we found Kirihara-kun’s group! Sogou-san’s here, too!” Kobato said, a look of relief spreading across her face as she met Ayaka’s eyes. Ayaka was already in a fighting stance, ready for the attack.

“Nnngh... Aaaaah!”

Sakura Asami came running through the forest, followed by a figure looming three meters off the ground, great horns ripping through the trees.

Oyamada took a step back.

“What?! Are you kidding me?!”

“It’s gone...it’s gone! It’s *gone*!” Asami sobbed as she ran from the forest. She was holding her left arm up with her right, a stump where one of her hands had been. A wave of shock went through the class, gasps and a stifled scream.

“Shiieeeee—!”

“Shaaaaaa—!”

Two giant humanoids emerged from the trees, huge broadswords and shields in their bony hands—skeleton knights. Ayaka broke into a cold sweat.

She gripped her flail.

This is nothing like the monsters I’ve fought before. I’ve never even seen anything this big or strong! Can I even fight them with this thing? No...I have to! I need to buy time for everyone else to get aw—

“Hands off my skeleton knight!” Oyamada screamed. “These ones are ours! Our territory, our kills! Don’t you dare steal it again, freakin’ S-class!”

Even the members of Kirihara’s group looked surprised.

“Wh—?! Oyamada?! The Goddess told us to run away if—”

“It’s fine,” interrupted Kirihara.

“Kirihara?”

“Only the weak run. Not me. I’m already in a class of my own.”
I need to support them, no matter what they say!

Ayaka inched forward into a position to cover them, when—

“S-sorry, Sogou-san!” Kashima called out and hurried over with the injured girl still on her shoulder. “Could you look after Mamiya-san for a while?!”

“What? Y-yes, of course...”

Kashima hurried over to see to Asami, the girl who had lost her hand.

Everybody else looks so pale, but...no. Kashima's voice is shaking, her hands are trembling, but she knows she has to help.

“I’m going to bandage this up, okay? We’ve got to stop the bleeding, Sakura-san!”

“Waaah... I don’t... I don’t wanna...” she moaned.

“Th-the Goddess might be able to heal this for you!”

“I...I wanna go home... I just wanna go home...!”

Her lips were turning blue, and tears streamed down her face. Kashima quickly undid her belt, tied it around Asami’s bloody wrist, and pulled it tight.

“It hurts!!”

Mamiya flinched at the sound of Asami’s screams. “Wh-what’s Kashima even doing? Sh-she’s such a loser... She can’t...”

“Kashima-san’s doing the right thing.”

Kirihara and Oyamada both stepped forward.

“One each, Shougo,” said Kirihara.

“I *know*! You don’t have to tell me! I’m gonna kill you, freakin’ horned guy!” yelled Oyamada. He swung his greatsword in an arc, then launched it at one of the skeleton knights. The skeleton deflected with its shield, knocking the greatsword into the trees, but that was the opening Oyamada needed. He ducked under the monster’s shield and activated his unique skill.

“Bullet! Take that!”

Glowing red streaks of energy flashed out of his fists and struck the skeleton before the greatsword had even hit the ground.

“Gahh, ghghh?!”

The skeleton knight stumbled.

“Not done yet! Bullet, bullet! Ha ha ha! Bullet! Bullet!”

“Gh?! Gh, hh?! Eh?! Sh—, gh—, eh?! Kh, Eh?!”

He fired his skill over and over, and the skeleton knight finally fell to its knees. Seconds later it was dust, swept away in the wind as if the monster had never been there.

“Heck yeah! Leeevel up!” Oyamada threw his fists up in the air. On his left, Kirihara had already incinerated his skeleton knight in a single shot of his Dragonic Buster.

“I thought those monsters were supposed to be a challenge! I’m so much better than they are. I, Kirihara Takuto, continue to amaze myself...”

Kirihara’s group cheered him on.

“Kirihara does it again!”

“He’s so freakin’ coool~!”

“S-class heroes are somethin’ else!”

Kirihara sighed.

“This makes...level 24,” he remarked to himself.

“I apologize for keeping you waiting.”

The Goddess Vicius emerged from the back of the room. Sogou Ayaka sat watching her from an uncomfortable chair, frowning at the insincere tone. This was one of the Goddess’s private rooms—the walls were lined with high bookshelves, arranged around a large desk piled high with scrolls and letters. The Goddess took a seat in the plush chair front of Akaya.

“I’m so sorry for calling you out like this, Sogou-san.”

“What do you need from me?” she asked. It had only been a few hours since their return from the Enchanted Bone Ruins.

“Oh ho ho.” With a sharp smile, the Goddess laid a small pouch on the table in front of her. “Forgive me—I forgot to provide you with pocket money, Ayaka-san. With my busy schedule, it slipped my mind, but that *hardly* excuses such an oversight. As an S-class, you must have expenses to deal with.”

Did she really forget? I can’t help but doubt her.

“Since the Demon King’s army’s sudden move south and the fall of the Nightwall, I’ve had so much to do,” the Goddess said, turning to pull a scroll from the shelf behind her. “It can take a terribly long time to get reliable information from the less important territories.”

“Can’t you delegate that to somebody else?”

“Oh, I have. Yet I fear everything falls to me in the end. Well, on

to business,” she said, changing the subject abruptly. “I heard that some skeleton knights gave you trouble?”

“What’s going to happen to Sakura-san?”

“Oh, that? She’ll be fine. I can reattach her hand with one of my healing skills.”

“I see. Thank you, that’s good to hear.”

Thank God...

“And yet...I cannot simply dispense the power of the Gods to every injured unfortunate who comes my way, can I? My healing skill is *especially* taxing. And, well, Sakura-san is only a B-class hero...”

I can read between the lines—she wouldn’t even consider healing anyone with a lower rank than B-class.

The Goddess smiled.

“Incidentally... It appears you’re quite isolated from your peers, Sogou-san. Are you doing all right out there? It’s been...concerning.”

“I’ve been handling things on my own, yes.”

“Ahem, well, that might have been a foolish question. Perhaps you aren’t even aware of it yourself.”

Ayaka hesitated a moment.

“Whether I’m *confused*, you mean?”

“Oh no, not at all! You’ve calmed down quite a bit since our first meeting—look at us now, having this nice little chat. Oh, but did Kirihara-san and the others say something to you? My, it troubles me to see old news and rumors spreading through the class.” The Goddess gave her a worried look. “Someone in a position of power should really set the record straight~!”

“What do you mean? What don’t I know?”

“Won’t you join Kirihara-san’s group? I really would prefer it if all you S-class heroes worked together.”

Ayaka looked away.

There’s something wrong with Kirihara’s group... They seem unstable, like they’re too caught up in killing to think straight.

“I don’t believe Kirihara-kun and I would work well together. It would be difficult for us to fight side by side right now.”

The Goddess smiled again.

“This is exactly what I’m talking about. Your selfishness is throwing a wrench right into the smooth functioning of class 2-C.”

“S-selfishness?”

What does she mean?

“Oh, am I mistaken? Can you explain your actions *logically*? Not with vague emotions or gut reactions, but with facts?”

“Ah, I—”

“No? You can’t? Just acting on your biases with no thought for anyone else. Oh, what a disappointment. The Takao sisters are hopeless, but I at least thought that *you*...well, I thought you could be reasoned with, Sogou-san. To think you’d be this selfish.”

“I-I’m not!” Ayaka cut in. “I-I just...”

“That’s quite enough,” said the Goddess, and Ayaka could see tears glistening in her eyes. “I was a poor teacher to you, I brought this upon myself...I have only myself to blame for your failings,” she sobbed.

Ayaka stood up.

“Sogou-san?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t care if it’s selfish of me—I can’t join Kiri하라-kun’s group, at least not the way it is right now.”

“The people of this world cry out for your help! Will you turn your back on them?”

“I will still fulfill my duties as an S-class hero.”

“You won’t change your mind?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t.”

The Goddess was quiet for several long moments. Finally, she nodded firmly.

“Understood.”

Like a switch had been flipped, the Goddess grinned and lightly clapped her hands together to end the conversation.

“Well then, I’ll entrust you with all the students who couldn’t pass my trial.”

“What?”

I thought this was about me joining Kiri하라’s group. What is she talking about?

“They’ve all been ignored by the other heroes, but leaving them alone doesn’t do anyone any good, wouldn’t you agree? They’re all C-class and below, but not to worry! I’m sure they’ll become strong, capable warriors under your S-class instruction!” The Goddess

suddenly looked remorseful. "I just pray they all make it through alive."

"Wh-why are you doing this now? I thought we agreed that I would fight on their behalf!"

"We've had orders from the king, I'm afraid."

"The king?"

Does a Goddess really take orders from a king? Something doesn't feel right about this.

"Any heroes who refuse to fight are to be disposed of. I tried to reason with him, of course! Alas, my pleas fell on deaf ears... I'm sorry, but there's nothing more I can do."

"..."

"I was concerned about what to do with them, but with you in charge, I'm certain it will work out for the best!"

"..."

"Sogou-san?"

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I would have no choice but to..." The Goddess trailed off.

"A-all right."

"Wonderful, I leave them in your capable hands! If you still refuse to join Kirihara-san's group, this will have to do."

The Goddess went on to explain in more detail what she expected of the ignored heroes. When it was over, Ayaka gave a short bow before heading for the door.

"I'll be going..."

"Ah, one more thing!" said the Goddess. "If some of them start to drag you down, well... You tend to ignore the harsher realities of life, I fear. But you won't truly be strong until you accept reality, Sogou-san. I believe you have that potential, that you're capable of changing and adapting. If you ever grow out of this selfish streak and become a well-rounded adult, I'm sure Kirihara-san and the others will accept you. When that day comes, I'll vouch for you. You have my word."

"Th-thank you for your kindness."

"Not at all. I expect great things!"

"Goodbye," said Ayaka. She closed the door behind her.

The Goddess Vicius

“**M**EDDLESOME LITTLE BRAT...”

“These blasted troublesome apes.”



AS WE MADE OUR WAY THROUGH THE RUINS, I introduced Mist to Piggymaru.

“I was growing concerned—I could feel a monster’s presence nearby but never caught a glimpse of it. But now I understand,” she said, looking curiously at the little slime.

Once we ventured down the hidden stairway, she did seem on edge, even when there weren’t any monsters around. Well, other than Piggymaru.

“Come on out, Piggymaru.”

“Sque...?”

It nervously stretched out a tentacle in Mist’s direction. She reached out her hand to meet it.

“Is it safe?” she asked, glancing at me.

“Yeah.”

“Squee~! Squ-quee... Squee...?”

Piggymaru was still on high alert, poking at Mist’s finger with its tentacle. Her face softened into a smile.

“My name’s Mist Balukas. Nice to meet you, Sir Piggymaru.”

“Squee? Squ... Squ... Squeee~! ♪”

Piggymaru rubbed its tentacle against Mist’s finger and turned pink, the color for affection.

“Aw, what an adorable little slime. Looking at it is strangely calming.”

“Squee~! ♪”

“I think it likes you. It’s never shown interest in anyone other than me before.”

“Squ—?! Squee~!”

A tentacle poked over in my direction, squishing against my cheek and glowing an even deeper shade of pink. Mist covered her mouth and laughed.

“It appears you’re still the favorite.”

“Squee! ♪”

We encountered more monsters on our descent, but Mist cut them all down without breaking a sweat. She was amazing—she never

seemed to struggle, never had a close call, and she fought like it was the most natural thing in the world to her. Eventually we came to another residential part of the ruins.

I've seen doors like these before. Or more specifically, I've seen crystals set into doors like these...

I poured mana into one of the doors, and it slid open with the sound of grating stone. I carefully stepped inside to investigate, leaving Mist standing guard outside. The room was deserted, empty but for a few decaying pieces of furniture. *Nothing interesting.*

"I don't see any traps," I called to Mist. "You can come in."

"Thank you," she said, stepping through the door. I closed it after her, took off my backpack, and checked my watch.

"Let's take a break here."

"Understood."

"You can nap if you want. I'll wake you up when I'm ready to go."

Mist paused before responding.

"No, it's fine."

"You really don't look like you're getting enough sleep... If you're going to be my bodyguard, you'll need to rest to protect me properly, right?"

She averted her eyes. "I don't think I could sleep, even if I wanted to."

"Just lie down and see what happens. Even if you don't sleep, the rest will do you good. I don't want you collapsing before we get to the bottom of these ruins."

Mist thought for a while, then sighed, smiling slightly.

"All right...I'll lie down, at least." She took off her faintly glowing visor, removed her sword, and turned to lie on the sleeping bag facing away from me.

"Piggymaru."

"Squee."

I had whispered orders to Piggymaru before calling Mist into the room. *Distract her.*

Piggymaru squished into a ball on the ground and rolled closer to Mist, stopping in her line of sight.

"Squee!"

“Sir Piggymaru? What’s the matter?”

“Squee!”

“It’s okay,” I said, extending my hand. “Sleep.”

Mist fell asleep immediately.

Now she can get some rest, at least until the gauge runs out. Even a short period of deep sleep can cure fatigue—I think I read that on the internet.

“If the duration on this thing was longer, I could use this to cure insomnia...”

Well, I don’t know for sure if the people I put to sleep with this skill are actually getting any rest.

“Sque, Sque, Sque, Sque, Sque!” Piggymaru rocked back and forth like a metronome.

Hmm? Is it protecting her?

“Squee? Squesque?!”

Mist’s visor, which had been on the floor next to her, disappeared. The sword by her side was gone a moment later. Then Mist herself began to change, too.

“Wha—”

Her ears... Long. Pointed.

“She’s an elf?”

I walked around to get a look at her face.

“Squee?”

Piggymaru seemed confused. *What’s going on?* it seemed to ask.

“I had my suspicions, but...this is wild.”

It wasn’t just her ears—my Sleep skill must have dispelled some kind of illusion. Her hair and ears had changed, but her face was what really took my breath away. Before the change, I’d thought Mist was beautiful, but now...it was something more. I was used to seeing beautiful women—my foster mother, Sogou Ayaka, the Takao sisters—and I thought they all fit in the same category, but...

This is different. Mist Balukas...it’s like she isn’t even real. She seems less like a living, breathing person and more like a perfectly sculpted work of art... What did that guy say at the inn?

“I hear they’re so beautiful, they’ll make even the toughest mercenaries’ hearts race!”

So this is what he meant.

I thought about Monk Droghetti, who'd been rejected by Mist and killed in the ruins. I'd been suspicious that Mist was hiding something ever since that incident in the square. Monk just seemed *too* sure of himself. Why was he so confident it was her? She was wearing a hood, and he never even got a good look at her face, but he'd been so certain.

Why didn't he give up?

But he was right, and I thought I knew why. Just as I recognized her voice from the forest, Monk recognized it too, all these years later. Whatever power she used to disguise her ears and face was only visual—I don't think she can alter her voice. And that's what gave her away as this Seras Ashrain person...

Glancing down at the rest of her, her body seemed identical to before.

It looks like she can only disguise her head with this ability, too. Didn't Monk say something about remembering the shape of her body? Her breasts were burned into his memory, I guess? Well, if that's the most important thing to someone, that's what they'd remember. That must be why he was so surprised when she took off her hood and her face was so different.

Monk's confusion, his panicked denial of what was right in front of him, made more sense as I looked down at Mist's pointed ears.

When he tried to touch her, she slapped him away...

"Does that mean it's only an illusion? Her ears don't actually change shape; it just looks like they do?"

I remembered listening in on the inn patrons talking about elves. *Using the power of the spirits, right?*

"Guess this is what they meant."

Maybe she can see through my lies using the power of these spirit things, too. The visor, the sword, the armor...does she create them with this spirit power, too? Her spirit powers weren't dispelled when I paralyzed her in the forest, but I guess she can't keep them up when she's asleep.

"So my Sleep skill can dispell her abilities temporarily." That was another tactic I hadn't thought of—putting enemies to sleep to disrupt their spells. I watched my beautiful bodyguard as she slept peacefully, the blue gauge slowly ticking away.

"..."

I was suspicious, but...no, I think it has to be true. The high elf princess, runaway knight from the Holy Empire of Neah...

Mist Balukas is...

“The Princess Knight, Seras Ashrain.”

Chapter 3: Seras Ashrain

AFTER GIVING MY INSTRUCTIONS to Piggymaru, I retreated to my own sleeping bag.

“Sorry for always giving you these kinds of jobs, buddy.”

“Squee. ♪”

I checked the blue Sleep gauge over Mist’s head, then turned my back to her and pretended to sleep.

I don’t want to get into true identities while we’re in the middle of these ruins. Mist—Seras Ashrain—there’s so much I don’t know about her, but that’s not my problem right now. I’m here to get ingredients for Piggymaru’s monster enhancement solution, that’s all. I just hope she doesn’t realize that I made her fall asleep.

I closed my eyes and waited for the effect to wear off.

“Nh... Huh?”

She was awake. I heard a faint, high-pitched sound—maybe her gear popping back into existence? *Does the illusion automatically restore itself when she wakes up?*

“I can’t believe it... I slept? But...”

I heard rustling as she pushed herself up from the sleeping bag.

“The contract shouldn’t have expired yet. Why did this happen?”

Contract? She won’t sleep as long as she has a contract with these spirits?

She breathed a sigh of relief, likely upon seeing me resting with my back toward her.

All right—it doesn’t seem like she knows I’m the one who put her to sleep. Piggymaru did a great job distracting her.

“Squee...?”

“Sir Piggymaru? Were you asleep?”

“Squee.”

I don’t think slimes need to sleep, but I told Piggymaru to pretend to.

“Oh, I see.”

Another sigh of relief—Piggymaru didn’t see anything either.

“Squee~! ♪”

“Wh-what’s the matter? Oh, don’t tell me... You’re feeling lonely since Sir Hati is asleep?”

“Squee! Squee. ♪ Squee~! ♪”

“Ah, well...I’m sorry, but... Could you please not touch me?”

“Sque?! Squee...squee...”

“Oh, it’s nothing against you, Sir Piggymaru, not at all...!”

Piggymaru let out a loud squee, just as planned, as Mist tried to explain herself.

Perfect...now I can wake up “naturally.”

I rolled over slowly, stifling a yawn and rubbing the sleep out of my eyes.

“Hm...? What’s up, Piggymaru? Did something happen?”

“Oh, I’m so sorry—did I wake you?” Mist asked as I rubbed my temples.

“Nah, it’s fine. I’m sorry I didn’t wake you up like I promised. I must’ve drifted off.”

“That’s quite all right, Sir Hati.”

Her face was back to normal, and the visor and other gear had returned too.

I don’t think she realizes I was only pretending to be asleep. Maybe she can only detect lies if I say them out loud.

“Are you feeling a bit more rested?” I asked.

“Yes...thank you for giving me the chance. I suppose I didn’t realize how tired I was.” She chuckled awkwardly.

She seems thrown off, but that makes sense if she didn’t think she’d be able to sleep at all. She probably feels weird about it, but also relieved that I didn’t discover her true identity.

“Sleep’s more important than we like to admit,” I said. I learned that the hard way in the Ruins of Disposal.

“Yes, it is. I’m sorry if I made you worry that I cannot fulfill my duty as your bodyguard. I’ll be more conscientious in the future.”

I nodded. “Good idea. I don’t want either of us to get hurt.” We packed our things, left the room, and made it down another level.

“This floor has more light crystals, doesn’t it?”

“So it seems,” said Mist, looking cautiously around the ruins. Even a short sleep seemed to have done her good—she moved a little faster and more confidently than before.

“I wonder why,” I said.

“The crystals are more common in places with higher concentrations of mana, I believe,” she replied.

There were a lot up nearer to the surface... I guess that means the surface has a high mana concentration.

“So, this might be some kind of special floor?”

“It’s possible.”

“I hope that means we’re getting close to my ingredients,” Touka said. “I have something I’ve been meaning to ask, by the way.”

“What is it?”

“That stone staircase that opened up to let us down here—do you think it’ll close automatically?”

The Great Sage must have been down here to discover this location, but the staircase was closed when we arrived.

“The ancient ruins are said to be maintained by repair ghosts who roam their halls, though no one has ever confirmed their existence.”

“What’s a repair ghost?”

“It’s believed that in each ruin, there are spirit- like monsters that roam the ruins and restore their functions.”

That’s kind of an weird belief, but...well, stranger things have happened.

We stopped before an imposing door—the whole thing was covered with bones.

Mist eyed it warily. “I believe this door is a warning. Let’s proceed with caution, Sir Hati.”

“It’s already half open.”

We approached carefully, peering into the room beyond the door. The walls were completely covered with bones of all sorts, monster and human alike.

I can’t sense any monsters nearby.

We did a quick search of the room but couldn’t find anything of note.

The crystals in this room are a slightly different color than the others, aren’t they? Hmm.

I bent down to touch the floor.

“Sir Hati?”

“I think...the monster who lives here might not be home.”

There were tracks on the ground, and marks where something had been dragged across the room. They crossed each other in places—some were clearly more recent than others.

Did the monster that lives here leave those? This thing must be huge...so where did it go? Ugh, figures. It's not like the dungeon boss is always just going to be sitting here waiting for somebody to show up.

“What should we do, Sir Hati?”

“Let's go find it—it might be the one I'm after.”

We turned to leave, then...

Thud.

“Did you hear that?” I asked.

“Yes,” Mist replied.

“Squee.”

“It must've realized we're here.”

It's far away, but from the sound of it, it's getting closer quickly. At least it sounds like just one monster.

“Eeeeh—! Geeeeh—!”

It let out a roar that echoed through the hallways and seemed to come from everywhere at once.

“What do we do now?” asked Mist.

“Let's find somewhere to watch and wait—that spot near the staircase looked like a good place to hide.”

We don't know how strong this thing is—we even don't know if it's the skeleton king. It might not be the monster I'm looking for.

I remembered the Soul Eater. *I can never let my guard down.*

We hurried into a wide area with a low ceiling.

Just a little further to...

Crash!!

The creature burst through the wall with a mighty cracking of stone, sending crystal shards and rock flying in all directions. This was nothing like the monsters we'd faced so far.

“Th-this is—” Mist breathed in shock, “a skeleton king!”

I know how she feels.

The monster was huge, almost as big as the zombie dragon. It didn't have space to stand, so it crouched on all fours. Its head looked

like it was wearing a crown of bones, and eerie orange light glowed in the depths of its black eyes, flashing and pulsating. It wasn't made of bones the way an ordinary skeleton is; it was a chimera of them, human, animal, and monster bones making up the form of the creature and poking out in all directions.

Does it absorb the bones of other living things to grow stronger? Maybe the room we just left was its storehouse.

"Hyaaaaaaaah—! Gr-grraaaah—!" The hoarse cry sounded like a threat.

It isn't moving to attack though, just watching us...for now.

"Sir Hati."

"Hm?"

"Look at the bones in its lower jaw," said Mist, biting her lip. "Some of them look like silver."

"Yeah, I see them."

"If we can crack those, we might be able to defeat this monster, but...frankly, I doubt even the Sabre-Toothed Tigers could take this creature down. It's extremely large and strong, and I'd be surprised if mana skills work against it. Sir Hati, I think we should..."

The Sabre-Toothed Tigers again—they must be good.

I glared at the skeleton king. Its eyes darted back and forth, flashing like two great jars of fireflies. Mostly it looked at Mist. *It must think she's more of a threat. Hmm...as long as she's with me, enemies will always focus on her. I can use that when I attack.*

I remembered my fight with the Soul Eater.

Is this monster going to instantly counter my skills as soon as I try to use them? What level is this guy, anyway? I should try to find a weak spot before it can react to my skills, and—

"Sir Hati, I have a request." Mist's voice broke into my thoughts.

Crack, crack crack—

When I looked over, her sword was covered with thin veins of ice.

"I'm going to use my ice to turn this blade into a club to crush the bones of its weak spot. I'll also use my powers in a special way to improve my reflexes. I think I can defeat this thing, but...I want to hide the nature of my powers as much as I can. Will you keep what you see here a secret?"

The skeleton king opened its mouth, and orange light started to

gather there.

It's charging an attack to aim at Mist, but...not yet. There should be a moment when it focuses its attention fully on its attack and lets its guard down. That's what I need. If I move too early, we'll get blown away. I want to be sure...

"And I...I'm sorry. If the monster is stronger than I think it is, I might not be able to protect you. If the worst happens, please...take Piggymaru and run."

"Gyaa... Gaaaaaaaah—!"

It's preparing to fire. This is it.

"Paralyze!"

"Onk— Okk— Gok—"

The light in the skeleton king's mouth faded back to darkness.

"Okk— Onk? Oo...?"

The skeleton king was frozen. I could feel its confusion. I took a step toward it.

"What?"

Mist looked dumbfounded, her mouth open, ice melting away from her sword.

"Gotcha. I won't tell anybody about your powers," I said, looking back at her for a moment before reaching out at the skeleton king once more. "As long as you don't tell anyone about mine. *Poison.*"

The skeleton king flushed a bright purple.

As long as I have these skills, nothing can touch me. My weak points don't matter—nothing will ever hit them. They worked on the zombie dragon in the Ruins of Disposal... so they even work on monsters made of all bone. They've worked on every single creature I've tried them on...all except one.

"Wh-what is this? A spell of some kind...?" Mist looked at the skeleton king with wide eyes, her sword still held aloft, ready to strike.

"It's an ability I have. The reason all those other mercenaries left...I think they saw the monster corpses I left behind."

"Sir Hati, you did that?"

"I can't think of any other explanation. When I kill monsters with this skill, it doesn't leave any visible injuries. You remember what I did to you in the forest, don't you?"

I paralyzed you once before. Made you sleep, too—though you don't

know that yet.

“Well, my skills—they’re kinda unusual.”

The paralysis gauge had almost run out when the skeleton king died. The bones it had hoarded for so long came clattering down, leaving a mountain like a mass grave where the monster had been.

I didn’t level up.

“...”

This thing was stronger than anything else I faced down here, but its attack felt weaker than any of the monsters in the Ruins of Disposal. Maybe I was too cautious... Mist’s reaction made me worried about what it could do to us. No—I shouldn’t blame this on her. I need to get better at judging which monsters I need to be careful of. The normal rules don’t apply to me.

“Sir Hati, is this skeleton king the monster you were searching for?”

“Yeah, this is the whole reason I’m here,” I said, crunching across the field of bones toward the skeleton king’s head. Mist gulped. I took out *Forbidden Arts: The Complete Works* and leafed through to find the right page.

“Silver bone powder”

“Yeah, this is definitely the guy.”

I closed the book and put it back in my bag. During bag check, I’d passed it off as an old picture book. The inspectors were looking for illegal items and checking for smuggled treasure, and they did their best not to pry about people’s personal items, it seemed—apparently the mercs didn’t take kindly to their things being poked through.

“So I make the powder from this silver part, huh?”

I took out a small hammer and a bag, crouched down, and began to crush the bones into it.

“It’s surprisingly fragile,” I said absently.

“Skull-types lose most of their bone density after death,” explained Mist from behind me. She kept her distance, not asking all the questions she no doubt had for me.

I can tell she wants to know more, but she promised not to press me for personal details...she sure takes keeping her word seriously, huh?

Finished with the bone, I stood and turned to face her.

“Once we’re back on the surface, I’ll answer whatever questions I can.”

Mist laughed. “You noticed, then.”

“I have things I need to know, too, but...there are monsters down here, you know. Let’s save it for when we’re safe.”

“I understand. I’m impressed by your strength. Skeleton kings are famously strong—they’ve even been discovered deep in Alion’s ancient Enchanted Bone Ruins.”

Ancient bone ruins? I think that was on the list too, wasn’t it? I didn’t know where it was, so I chose the Mils ruins, but that’s good to know.

Mist stared at the skeleton king’s head.

“There’s a story told of some heroes from another world challenging a skeleton king in a battle to the death, finally defeating it, but perishing in the fight...it’s a legend, passed down from generation to generation.”

“Squee.”

“What’s wrong, Piggymaru?”

A small tentacle probed toward the skeleton king’s head.

“There’s something in there?”

“Squee!” It turned green.

I walked around to find a way into the empty, cavernous skull.

“Sir Hati? What’s the matter?”

I held up my pouch for light, illuminating several skeletons half absorbed into the bony walls of the skeleton king’s skull.

They must’ve been eaten by this thing...gross.

“Hm? There’s something hanging off one of these.”

There was something wrapped in cloth wedged under a skeleton’s arm. I crushed the bones to take it, then gently laid it down at my feet.

Is this a skull? it’s kinda rounded...

As I carefully unwrapped the object, the cloth began to glow, getting brighter as I peeled away layer after layer.

“What is this thing?”

A glowing brand appeared on the surface of the cloth, and I

pulled away, expecting an explosion, but it quickly dissipated.

Is this some sort of magic cloth?

Piggymaru urged me on, so I continued unwrapping until I uncovered the object beneath.

“An egg...?”

It was about the size and shape of an ostrich egg, strangely colored with swirls of red, black, and white—more like a piece of modern art than something found in nature. I tapped it lightly with my hand. It didn’t sound hollow, and it seemed unusually hard, almost like the skin of the creatures from the Ruins of Disposal.

Not heavy, though...I would barely feel this thing in my backpack.

“Squee!”

“You’re interested in this egg?”

“Squee!”

“Want me to take it with me?”

“Squee...?”

Do you mind? Piggymaru seemed to ask, hesitant but determined. The little slime had never been so persistent about something before.

“All right, if you say so. Let’s take it with us.”

“Squee~! ♪”

Thank you.

“You’re welcome. You’ve been a big help down here, after all.”

I tucked the strangely colored egg under my arm and made my way out of the skull.

“What was in there?” asked Mist, still standing guard, holding her sword. When I showed her the egg, her beautiful eyes lit up.

“It’s incredible,” she said.

“One of the humans inside the skeleton had it with them—it was wrapped in this weird cloth.”

The cloth seemed to have lost its power—I tried pouring mana into it, but nothing happened. *Does this thing only work once?*

“Have you ever seen an egg this color before?” I asked.

“Nothing like that, no.”

“Well, I just hope it’s not dangerous or anything.”

“Squee.”

Piggymaru looked apologetic.

“Don’t worry about it, Piggymaru! If it’s dangerous, we’ll just get rid of it, that’s all!”

“Squee!”

Piggymaru turned green in agreement.

“Right, then. Let’s head up to the surface.”

Shortly before we arrived back at the entrance to the ruins, we decided to split up.

“I don’t want to stand out,” I explained to Mist.

Whoever brings that Dragon-Eye Cup out of the ruins is going to be famous—that’s the whole reason I gave it up. I’m lucky Mist accepted it—not that she wants the attention, either. I guess the reward money takes priority for her. But with her illusion trick, she should be able to keep her secrets long enough to collect the reward. She doesn’t have to worry about Monk anymore, after all.

“We need to talk once we’re back on the surface. Can you meet me later tonight?” I asked before we parted ways.

“Of course. I’ll do my utmost to make it happen,” she said, smiling easily.

“I’d like it if we could meet alone, just the two of us.”

“J-just the two of us?” She gave it some thought, then nodded. “Very well. Where should we meet?”

“How about your room at the inn?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, but I no longer have a room there—”

“Then what about my room? I’ll let the innkeeper know to let you in.”

Mist smiled shyly.

“You’re efficient, Sir Hati.”

“Just cautious, that’s all. See you later.”

“Oh, Sir Hati—”

“I know, I won’t tell anybody about your powers.”

“That’s not it.”

She took my hand in hers and looked deeply into my eyes.

“Thank you again for the Dragon-Eye Cup, from the bottom of my heart.”

“What? You don’t need to thank me. Anyway, go on. I’ll wait a little before I head up.”

When I arrived at the surface, there was a crowd of mercenaries at the entrance, talking excitedly.

“The Dragon-Eye Cup?!”

“That’s the real deal!!”

“What? They found it?! Someone already found it?!”

“D-didn’t you hear about the death fog? What?! You went down there anyway?! Whooaa! Who knew that pretty face hid such bravery!”

“Incredible!”

“Hey! Looks like the fog’s clear—let’s get down there and get us some treasure!”

The Sabre-Toothed Tigers were nowhere to be seen—they were probably the first back in the ruins. The inspectors were falling over themselves to spread the good news.

“Get word to Cred immediately! Go, now!”

“But I’m not finished checking these bags, and—”

“What does that matter now?! This is the Dragon-Eye Cup! Finish Mist Balukas’s bag check and get going!”

“Y-yes!”

I switched to humble mode and approached the inspector I’d met on my way in.

“I’m back.”

“It’s you! Uh...bag check? Right!”

“Well, I found this egg-shaped stone thing and some bone powder—”

“Hm? Oh, take them with you, ingredients are fine. The Baron will take these jewels and things off your hands for a good price, if you want. Way higher than the regular merchants’ prices. Okay, you’re all set! Sorry, someone found the Dragon-Eye Cup, so we’re gonna be real busy for a while. Hey, you there!” he called over to another inspector. “Go tell the mercenaries’ guild the good news!”

“Yes, sir!”

That Dragon-Eye Cup is great cover for me—he barely checked my bags at all.

I looked toward the square, now bustling with returning

mercenaries.

“Guess I’m done with the ruins.”

I sold off the small metal objects and jewels I’d gathered, and I received a bonus as a celebration of the Dragon-Eye Cup discovery.

The Baron and his people must be happy. This money gives me a bit more leeway—I’ll have no problem paying for my room at the inn.

“I want to find out more about that egg, too.” I thought there might be something about eggs in *Forbidden Arts: The Complete Works*—I decided to take a look when I got a chance.

“Sir Hati!” Mist called out to me as I neared the town square.

“That was some commotion back there,” I said.

“It still doesn’t feel right to me. You’re the one they should be celebrating, Sir Hati,” said Mist, shifting uncomfortably.

“I didn’t come here to be celebrated, I just wanted ingredients,” I said, motioning to my backpack. “Can’t make potions with praise, can I? But how did it go for you? Did you get your prize?”

“I’ve been invited to the Baron’s residence tomorrow to receive my reward. I would refuse, but...he wishes to thank me personally.”

“I guess he has a penchant for ceremony.”

I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s trying to hire her.

“I’ll be staying in Mills for another night.”

“Where are you staying?”

“The Baron offered me a room in his mansion, but I turned him down. With tomorrow’s three hundred gold pieces, I can afford another night at the inn.”

“So, you have some free time before your meeting with the Baron?”

“Yes, I do. It seems I’ll be around for a little longer.”

I’d guess the Baron’s men are investigating if this cup is the real deal. Dunno how that’s going to work if they’ve never seen the real thing before, though.

I looked at my pocket watch.

“Why don’t we meet in my room around eight? You probably want to eat and rest beforehand, right?”

“Yes... Thank you for being so considerate.”

With that agreed, Mist headed for the inn and I continued to the square. I’d already bought all the equipment I would need to turn my

bone powder into monster enhancement solution when Mist and I had gone shopping. The instructions were laid out in *Forbidden Arts: The Complete Works*, and I'd managed to get almost all of what I needed with only a few substitutions. The process itself was surprisingly simple once I had the necessary ingredients in hand.

There's one other thing I want to buy, though. I was so caught up in clearing the ruins that it completely slipped my mind.

I headed to the main street, found the store I was looking for, and headed in. There were plenty in stock, and the prices were reasonable—no one was trying to cheat me this time.

“Could I get this one?”

I left the store, leaned up against its stone wall, unfurled my new purchase, and started to read.

“Hmm, so the state of Yonato is...”

A world map—exactly what I wanted.

Right now, I'm in the Kingdom of Ulza. Looks like Mils is the southernmost city in the kingdom... Any further than that and you're in the Dark Forest, near the Ruins of Disposal. The Great Ruins are in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters in the center of the continent, and north of that, there's the Kingdom of Magnar.

“The Kingdom of Magnar's on the front lines, fighting the Demon Empire, huh?”

The Kingdom of Magnar stretched from the east coast of the continent to the west. The Nightwall, which people at the inn said had fallen recently, seemed to be in a bottleneck between two large mountain ranges. *It must be in a mountain pass. I suppose that was the only way to cross the mountains from north to south, stopping invasion by the Demon King's army.*

In the southwest was the Empire of Mira.

The name came up in the inn...this must be the country that's ruled by the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

To the southeast, the Bakoss Empire...*and between the Bakoss and Ulza is the Holy Empire of Neah? I heard they were pretty much wiped out when the Bakoss Empire invaded—guess this map hasn't been updated yet.*

In the northwest, I found the state of Yonato, where Mist told me she was going.

“Wait a minute...”

I scanned the map to find the Kingdom of Alion, home to that foul Goddess and place inextricably linked to me by fate.

North—the Kingdom of Magnar.

Northeast—the Kingdom of Alion.

Northwest—the state of Yonato.

Central—the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters.

Southeast—the Bakoss Empire.

Southwest—the Empire of Mira.

South—the Kingdom of Ulza.

So the continent is roughly split into six countries, with the monsters in the middle. At least now I have some idea of where everything is.

Getting the map hadn't taken long, and there was plenty of time before I was due to meet Mist.

"Might as well head to the inn and try to make that monster enhancement solution."

Back in my room, I got to work.

Only one main ingredient—this shouldn't be too difficult.

Piggymaru sat on the bed, swaying back and forth, curiously watching what I was doing. I spread my equipment—freshly washed in the laundry room—out on a clean blanket. I'd chosen my supplies to be as compact and easy to carry as possible. *I might need these again.*

"Hmm, so first..." I thought aloud, leafing through *Forbidden Arts: The Complete Works*.

Smash the bones, crush them into a fine powder with a pestle and mortar, then mix with water.

As I mixed, the powder absorbed most of the water, changing it from silvery powder to a pale-blue translucent mush.

"Next..."

Pour the mixture into a flask and heat.

I took out a small burner and began to heat the flask. The liquid slowly cleared until it was completely transparent.

Feels like I'm cooking, almost...

"Next, I need to filter it with this thing. But first..."

Part of the filtration device was made of crystals. I poured mana into them and they began to glow.

It uses mana to filter more thoroughly. This and the heating element were both pretty expensive—apparently all mana-powered tools are. They wear out, too, so you can only use them so many times.

I poured my bone-powder solution into the filter and waited until it had all drained through.

“All right.”

It looked like I had so much powder, but...

“Huh. Only ended up with about a coffee cup’s worth of this stuff in the end.”

Anyway. Monster enhancement solution complete.

I suddenly realized how tired I was and checked the time.

“...I have a little time to nap.”

Sleep is so important. I haven’t shaken off the fatigue from the ruins yet. Testing this stuff out on Piggymaru can wait until the morning. I don’t want to give it to the little guy, fall asleep, and then have something terrible happen. I’m pretty sure it’s safe, but it can’t hurt to be careful.

“Your monster enhancement is gonna have to wait until tomorrow, Piggymaru.”

“Squee. ♪”

I asked Piggymaru to wake me up in a few hours, then fell asleep.

I awoke to Piggymaru’s cry of “Squee!” as the little slime squelched over to my watch. I rolled over to look at it.

Early.

“More than enough time for dinner.”

The food hall downstairs wasn’t as busy as I’d expected given the time. I took a seat at the counter.

“Seems like a lot of the mercenaries have already moved on, doesn’t it?” sighed the innkeeper as I ate. “And did you hear? They even found the Dragon-Eye Cup the Baron was searching for! Just like that! Some mercenaries are still out searching for treasures on the lower floors, but...”

The grand prize has already been taken, huh.

“The other day we were full, but now the rooms are emptying out faster than I can fill them. Is this how it’s going to be until the next floor is discovered? The Baron will be searching deeper for sure, but...”

The innkeeper was practically talking to himself—he seemed resigned to the comings and goings of the crowds based on the state of the ruins.

It must be like a seasonal festival for these people.

“Oh, but Mr. Hati?”

“Yes?”

“It’s not all bad! The one who found the Dragon-Eye Cup is actually staying at this very inn~! She had a room here even before she found the cup!” He lowered his voice conspiratorially. “And...she’s a real beauty.”

Looks like Mist got her room back with no problems. I bet he’d be surprised that the discoverer of the Dragon-Eye Cup is meeting me in my room later!

“The food’s great here—that’s probably what has her coming back,” I suggested.

“The one who discovered the Dragon-Eye Cup staying at *my* inn! This is going to draw crowds, Mr. Hati!”

After I’d eaten, I took a few pieces of meat and some salad for Piggymaru and went back upstairs.

“Munch, munch~! ♪”

As Piggymaru was eating, there was a knock at the door. The little slime quickly turned into its crystal ball form.

“Sir Hati, it’s me.”

I glanced at my watch. Right on time.

“You wish to hire me as a bodyguard?” asked Mist curiously.

“Yeah. I figured it’d solve your money problems—though I guess with that Dragon-Eye Cup, you’re probably not hurting for coin anymore. But still, it never hurts to have more, does it?”

This is a mean way of getting her to help me, but mentioning the cup will remind her of how guilty she felt and give her a little push.

“It is as you say...I need as much as I can get.” Mist sat stiffly on the edge of my bed—I was sitting off in the corner.

“You’re headed for the state of Yonato, right?”

“That’s correct...”

I opened my world map.

“As you’ve probably realized, I need to meet the Forbidden Witch—which means I need to venture into the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters.”

“Yes,” Mist nodded. “That much I had already surmised.”

“So if you’re traveling by land, you’ll have to cross through the

Empire of Mira to the west or the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters to the north, right?”

“Yonato doesn’t accept boats from Mira anymore—the western sea routes are closed.”

“Hm? You can’t travel by boat from Ulza to Yonato, you mean?”

“It’s not feasible, especially not for a simple traveler or mercenary. Mira likely resents the gathering Holy Order applicants, and there are rumors of bad blood between the Yonato holy priests and Mira’s Wildly Beautiful Emperor.”

“The Wildly Beautiful Emperor, huh? Ruler of Mira, right?”

Wildly Beautiful Emperor Falkendotzine—I heard the name in the inn earlier and couldn’t help but remember the long, elaborate title and hard-to-pronounce name.

“Yes. The sea routes to the east are too dangerous—they would take me close to the frozen sea and the Demon King’s armies.”

“So there’s no choice but to travel by land?”

“Unfortunately so.”

“Which way are you planning to go?”

“I...”

Must be a difficult choice for her. The Empire of Mira really despises the Holy Order, but the other road sounds tough. I don’t know if Mist is really one of these Holy Order applicants yet, though...

“After I’m done with the witch, I wouldn’t mind coming with you through the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters. I defeated that skeleton king, didn’t I? I’m pretty good at fighting these things.”

“To be frank, that’s the path I’d rather take if possible. The road through Mira presents unique and plentiful dangers of another kind.”

Mist fell silent.

Going through the center of the continent, we’ll likely be attacked by groups of monsters regularly. I have Piggymaru to be the eyes in the back of my head, but the best it can do is tell me where the enemies are—not fight them itself. I don’t expect it’s going to get much stronger either, even with the monster enhancement solution. If monsters came at us from all sides, I don’t know if I could deal with them. It’d be a real help to have an experienced warrior with me.

I was planning on hiring somebody, but in the ruins with Mist, I realized she’s the perfect choice.

Mist looked a little overwhelmed as she considered my proposal.

I guess there's a big problem for her with this arrangement—and I have a good idea what it is.

The silence dragged on as Mist thought, hesitation writ large on her face.

I didn't want to have to do this, but if this is what it takes to convince her...although I don't even know if she'll fall for it.

“You don't need to answer right away. I understand why, as a prospective member of the Holy Order of the Purge, you're reluctant to pass through the Empire of Mira. Oh, and another thing—Seras?”

“Yes? What is it?”

Mist froze, her hand on her face, as she realized what she'd just said.

“Ah...”

She just responded to somebody else's name.

“Um, Sir Hati... Look, I...”

“Sorry for springing that on you.”

Mist looked down at the floor.

“You knew.”

“Yeah.”

I told her everything—how I'd used my Sleep skill on her and seen the shape of her ears and face change. I explained why I'd suspected her true identity.

“I see.”

She accepted it much more easily than I'd expected.

“Don't worry, I won't tell anyone. I don't need the bounty—there'd be nothing in it for me if I turned you in. What I need is your strength as a warrior.”

Mist—*no*, *Seras Ashrain*—smiled uncomfortably.

“You were hesitating just now over whether to tell me the truth, weren't you?” I asked.

“I—”

“If we were to travel together, you'd eventually need to sleep, right? That'd be a problem unless I knew your true identity.”

Seras looked taken aback.

“Y-yes, it was on my mind...”

We can sleep in separate rooms in an inn like this, but not so much

in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters.

"I'm just guessing, but...when you sleep, that disguise of yours goes away, right? Your face and ears turn back to normal. I thought... if I know who you really are, you can change whenever you need to."

"...I see."

"I saw you hesitating to tell me just now, so..."

I took the first step.

"Like I said, I've no intention of selling you out to anybody. I need your help."

Seras still hesitated.

"The power of my spirits is different from others," she said finally, laying a hand on her chest. "When I made my contract with them, I sacrificed my ability to sleep."

Seras went on to explain that the spirits always ask for an offering of a person's most crucial desire—for her, that was sleep.

Given everything she could've sacrificed, it's fair to assume she never had many desires in the first place.

"When you're borrowing the powers of the spirits, you can't sleep?"

"That's correct. I can get some brief rest, hovering between consciousness and shallow sleep, but I can never truly fall asleep."

I see...so that's why she always looks so tired—it's like she's taking out a loan of all the sleep she should be getting and offering it to these spirits instead. She wants to sleep but she never can...and never will, so long as she's benefiting from the contract.

The thought sent shivers down my spine.

Seras told me she was contracted to three different spirits. The spirit of light, who changed her face and ears; the spirit of wind, who let her tell truth from falsehood; and the spirit of ice, who reinforced her weapons. Her armor and other equipment was created and maintained by this trinity of spirits working in unison.

"I can only sleep once I have paid off my debts to the spirits. And whenever I sleep, my ears and face return to normal."

"That's why you wanted your own room? So people wouldn't see your real face while you slept?"

"Yes."

I guess she didn't intend to sleep in the Mils ruins, and she shouldn't even have been able to. She can only protect her identity as long as she

stays awake. My Sleep skill was the one thing she couldn't predict.

"About the four hunters you killed in the forest..." Seras said, avoiding my eyes. "They were chasing me. I had slipped up and shown them my true face."

She can't change her body, so they could still find her. Those men from the forest were twisted and cruel, but talented trackers.

"The White Walkers... When you killed them, it freed me and let me continue my journey. I'm once again in your debt. Thank you."

Seras's head glowed with a faint light, and suddenly she was back to *normal*—the *normal* I had seen in the ruins. *Pointed ears, stunning beauty.*

"You trust me now?" I said, standing up from my chair.

Seras stood too.

"Yes. You have earned that, Sir Hati," she said, now looking straight at me with those clear, piercing eyes of hers.

"I think I can trust you, too. It's Too-ka."

"Hm?"

Seras looked taken aback.

"My real name—it's Too-ka Mimori. Don't tell anybody my real name, and I won't tell anybody yours."

This is the perfect gesture to build trust with someone like Seras. Like guilt, trust is just another chain to tie her to me. I give her my name and tighten the chains.

"Sir Hati—no, Sir Too-ka."

Seras's expression softened. *Perfect, just as planned.*

"Nice to meet you. My name is Seras Ashrain. I will be happy to join you as your bodyguard through the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters," she said, extending her hand.

"Nice to meet you too, Seras," I said, and shook her hand. Then, I looked toward the door.

"Piggymaru."

"Squee."

The little slime squished over to us. It had been keeping an eye on the door in case anybody tried to eavesdrop.

"Squee~! ♪"

Piggymaru squeaked, rubbing up against Seras's feet and turning a pale pink color. Seras smiled and sat back down on the bed.

“Nice to meet you again too, Sir Piggymaru.”

“Squee. ♪”

I offered Seras one of the blue gemstones I’d found in the Ruins of Disposal as payment for her protection. The pair I’d taken them from didn’t know how much they’d be worth, but maybe Seras would.

“Ah!”

She fumbled and almost dropped the little blue stone, quickly catching it before it hit the floor.

“I... I’m sorry.”

“Are you okay?”

“Just surprised, that’s all.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Sir Too-ka, I believe this is a blue dragonstone.”

“Blue dragonstone? I got it from someone who told me it might be valuable.”

I remembered the spirit’s words.

“I hope our treasures can help you when you get up to the surface. They should last you for quite some time...as long as the economy didn’t crash or anything!”

Seras picked up the lamp on my bedside table and inspected the gemstone closely.

“It’s real, isn’t it?” she said with wonder in her voice.

“I don’t know,” I answered.

“Sir Too-ka, would you mind pouring mana into it?”

“You can’t do it yourself?”

“Unlike humans, my race is not adept at manipulating mana. We can only control small amounts of it—it’ll take more than I can muster to determine this gemstone’s authenticity.”

Is that why elves borrow the power of spirits to fight their battles?

“All right.”

I took the gemstone back from her and tried pouring mana into it. It glowed like a prism, a beautiful rainbow of colors, which faded as quickly as they’d come.

“It matches the descriptions I’ve read... I think this is real, Sir Too-ka.”

“Is it really worth that much?”

“Priceless would be a more accurate term,” she explained. “Blue dragonstones can only be obtained from creatures of legend, blue-eyed dragons. When they died and their bodies melted away, it is said that these small, beautiful stones could sometimes be found in their remains.”

Seras looked closely at the little stone sitting in my hand.

“Blue-eyed dragons were stronger than entire armies and were said to occasionally attack human villages. They were practically walking natural disasters. But legend says that a band of heroes and mercenaries vanquished them all in ages past.”

I remembered the two heroes from the Ruins of Disposal who had died hand in hand. *They must’ve been powerful warriors in their own rights...*

“Blue dragonstones aren’t available on the public market. They’re worth...” Seras looked flustered. She stroked her chin, trying to calm herself down and assess the situation. “They’re worth at least as much as the Dragon-Eye Cup reward, maybe more.”

“Then I guess it’s pretty valuable. So you’ll take it as payment?”

These things could be extremely useful in any future negotiations.

Seras held her hands out in protest.

“I can’t do that, Sir Too-ka.”

“Huh?”

“This is too valuable to be given so casually!”

She’s too nice for her own good.

“...”

I thought of the pouch full of gemstones in my bag—I had more than enough to share.

I tossed the blue dragonstone at Seras.

“Ah!” She caught it with both hands, flustered.

“Sir Too-ka...?”

“That’s yours now. Throw it away, keep it—do whatever you want with it.”

“What? N-no, I—”

“That’s your pay. Don’t tell me it isn’t enough for you.”

“I-it’s enough, but...”

It's worth as much as the reward for the Dragon-Eye Cup, isn't it?

"So, do we have a deal?"

"Squee?"

Piggymaru backed me up.

Eventually Seras relented, giving a long sigh.

"All right, I give up. I know it's a little late to ask, but...are you sure about this?" said Seras, looking troubled.

"Hm?"

"As you know, I'm being pursued as we speak. There are things I haven't shared with you yet. And...I think I should explain everything before we—"

She stopped, unsure of where to go from there.

"Whenever you want to talk, please tell me. I'm just happy that now you'll be able to sleep on the road."

No point having a sleep-deprived, unreliable bodyguard by my side. Since that problem's solved, we can move on.

"I never intended to expose your past in the process," he continued.

I know who Mist really is. Seras knows that I know who Mist really is. That's all I wanted.

"You're my bodyguard, and I'm your employer—I wanted to make that relationship easier on both of us. Like I said, if you feel like talking while we're on the road, I'm not gonna stop you. Maybe occasionally I'll need to know some details, but I have no intention of pressing you about your past."

"You're so considerate, Sir Too-ka."

I shrugged. "I guess I'm just a kind person."

I just stated the facts—if you want to misconstrue that as kindness, I'm not going to correct you.

"Think you can get some rest tonight?"

"I believe my disguise will wear off tonight, yes."

"Guess I won't need to put you to sleep then," I joked.

"So it would seem," she replied primly.

"Go get some rest. I figure you're not the type who enjoys long conversations and playing hostess."

Seras gave a bitter laugh.

“You’re not wrong.” Her face changed again, and her human ears returned.

Not letting her guard down, even just to walk the short hallway back to her room—she’s really careful.

Seras turned in the doorway and looked back at Piggymaru and me.

“Good night, you two.”

“Squee. ♪”

She smiled at Piggymaru.

“Sir Too-ka.”

“Hm?”

“Would you like to eat breakfast together tomorrow morning?”

“Sure.”

After we’d agreed on a time to meet downstairs, Seras said her goodbyes again and left.

“Right, then...”

It’s too early for me to sleep, especially after that nap.

I went over to pick up the bottle of monster enhancement solution from the table.

“Piggymaru, do you want to try this stuff now? If you’re scared, I can wait until—”

“Squee!” Piggymaru interrupted, turning green.

“Already good to go then, partner?”

“Squee! ♪”

The slime took on the shape of a bowl.

“You want me to pour it into your...you?” I asked awkwardly.

“Squee.”

“All right...here goes.”

“Squee!”

I poured the transparent solution onto Piggymaru until the bottle was empty, and the slime returned itself to its normal rounded shape.

“Squee?”

Piggymaru’s body began to glow.

“Squeeeeeeee!”

The experiment was a success—Piggymaru reacted just as the

book said.

“It’s getting late—let’s leave the tests to tomorrow and stick to observations for now, huh?”

I sat on the bed and leafed through my copy of *Forbidden Arts: The Complete Works*, keeping an eye on Piggymaru and reading until I finally felt drowsy enough to fall asleep.

SERAS RETURNED to her room and, when she was sure she was safe and alone, let her disguise slip.

I need to sleep whenever I get the chance—I expect long, sleepless days for the foreseeable future...

Finding these opportunities was difficult, especially when she was forced to go on the run. She began to undress, brushing back her silky hair before wetting a cloth in the washbasin she'd borrowed from downstairs.

She gently wiped down her torso with the damp cloth. A sudden thought stopped her.



Perhaps I should've washed before meeting with Sir Too-ka earlier. Elves don't smell as strongly as humans, but we do have our own scent... especially after a day of fighting.

Cleansing my body for a man...what am I thinking? How long has it been? At home, I barely gave men a second thought. Sworn to protect the princess of the Holy Empire of Neah, I had no time or desire to form personal relationships with men. And human men are more vulgar than elves—our race is more decorous and aloof.

It was only one of the differences Seras had discovered after coming to live in a country filled with humans. When she had first arrived, it was difficult to hide her confusion at the way men would approach her so forcefully.

“Be careful of human men,” her mother always told her. The princess said the same. Seras remembered what happened in the square outside the Mils ruins.

That man, Monk...he remembered me. Ever since we met in Neah, he was relentless in his pursuit of me. I know the princess did her best to keep him away from me after I turned him down, but he was obsessed—not even she could calm him! I was terrified he was going to find me out in the square. How did he remember my body so perfectly?

Seras had always been hounded by human males, even in Neah. They deemed her beautiful, and apparently that was all they needed to know about her to pursue her relentlessly. She didn't understand any of it.

She'd never enjoyed the time she spent with those men, who only ever sought her out in hopes of *that*.

What has being beautiful ever done for me? It makes me isolated—forces me to keep my distance from others. That's why my time as a knight protecting the princess was so enjoyable. When I was a holy knight, I felt I could stand tall. I had found where I truly belonged.

After becoming the captain of the Band of Holy Knights, Seras had even less time for human men. It didn't lessen their interest, though. The princess used to say that those men had come down with the Seras sickness.

Ever since then, I've avoided contact with men...

Seras wiped the back of her legs with a washcloth and scowled at the thought.

Maybe I should have simply chosen to wear a mask and hide my face away for good, but...

Too-ka Mimori.

He's a strange human. Not exactly emotionless, but...less easily swayed by his feelings than most.

Of course, she had met men with no interest in her before—it wasn't like everyone she met threw themselves at her feet—but she had never been interested in them, either. She stopped wiping herself, the water falling to the white floor like dew from her dripping thighs.

I think he's interested in me, but...maybe not just in the way that men are usually interested in the opposite sex.

He interested Seras, too—that much went without saying. She changed into her sleeping clothes and lay down on the bed.

Perhaps he's simpler than I'm giving him credit for. But he has a strange fixation on justice and fairness. I might be able to...trust him.

The world she'd inhabited in the Holy Empire of Neah was filled with conspiracies and plots that whirled around the royal court. For Seras, always able to see who was lying to whom, the deception and backstabbing were too much to bear. She couldn't trust anyone.

That's how I made it this far. But if I can, I...

I want to trust him.

Seras walked these same paths again and again in her thoughts. As a runaway, she doubted everybody she met.

At long last, have I finally found it? Have I finally found someone to trust? Just as the princess did...to give my heart away...to a human man...

When she awoke, the morning sun was casting warm rays through the window onto her exposed skin. She felt like she'd agonized all night, but eventually she must have drifted off to sleep.

All right, then...

She pulled herself out of bed and went over to pick up the blue dragonstone Too-ka had given her. She smiled softly and closed her hand tightly around it.

"Time to go."

THE NEXT MORNING, I ate breakfast with Seras down in the food hall. The other patrons couldn't stop looking at her.

She's wearing her Mist Balukas face now—still beautiful enough to draw attention, although maybe it's the Dragon-Eye Cup's fault this time.

"Hey, over there! Looks like one of the mercenaries has already got in with her!"

"Heh heh, that's her type then, eh?"

"I hear she came out of his room last night!"

"Hah~! ♪ She found the Dragon-Eye Cup *and* found a good time!"

"Look at that miserable-looking guy! Oh man, what I wouldn't give... ♪"

Seras's spoon froze on the way to her mouth. She looked furious, and her free hand tightened into a fist.

"Humiliating me is one thing, but I cannot allow them to insult you, Sir Hati. You saved me!" she said.

"They can say whatever they want about me," I said carelessly, continuing to eat. "What good's it gonna do if I glare at everyone who says something bad about me? It's not like they're coming over here or anything."

There's no point starting a fight in a place like this.

Seras slowly unclenched her fist.

"You're quite mature, aren't you, Sir Hati?" she said, almost to herself.

"I'm used to being around bad people."

Used to it, or...it's more like I just don't bother with them anymore. Compared to Kirihara's group and that foul Goddess, those guys over there are nothing. It's easier to just ignore them.

"Thanks for not making a scene. To change the subject—have you ever heard of forbidden magic?" I had shown her the scrolls once, but I'd never brought the topic up directly before.

"I have, yes."

Really? I'm impressed...

"You know everything, Mist."

“Please, don’t misunderstand. I’ve always enjoyed going through old scrolls and books, that’s all,” said Seras, sounding dreamy. “Reading has always helped me calm down—it’s just me and the book in our own little world together.”

I have no idea how she feels. For me, reading is just getting information. Well, I suppose I’ve been moved by a story on occasion.

“Hmm...maybe I need a hobby, one that helps me relax the same way reading does for you. Anyway, you were telling me about forbidden magic?”

“Ah, yes. The term refers to a number of specific kinds of ancient magic.”

“Do you know why they’re forbidden?”

“I believe the Goddess Vicius declared them so.”

“Huh.”

“Sir Hati?”

“Just...what is that Goddess, anyway?”

“She’s said to be a descendant of the Gods, a bringer of joy and salvation descended from heaven. The God-dess from Alion owns this continent and everything upon it. When great evil appears, she uses her summoning magic to call forth heroes from another world to defeat it.”

“Then forbidden magic is just stuff she doesn’t want us to use?”

“Yes. Although scholars aren’t certain it even exists.”

This is important information. If the Goddess doesn’t want anybody using this magic, there’s probably a reason—like if it could harm her. It’d explain why the Great Sage brought those scrolls into the Ruins of Disposal with him in the first place, and that makes it that much more important for me to meet this Forbidden Witch, too... I have to find someone who can read these scrolls.

“I’m sorry that I can’t be of more help...that is all the general knowledge I have of ancient magic.”

“No, thank you. You’ve been a real help,” I said sincerely.

Seras put her hands on her lap and her shoulders sank.

“I-I’m happy to be of assistance...”

“You don’t need to be so formal all the time.”

“I think that might be the first time you’ve ever thanked me so directly, Sir Hati... I felt a little embarrassed, that’s all.”

Oh, I get it. A little kindness goes a long way with this one.

“So now what? I’d like to leave Mils today if we can.”

“I see. After this, I need to—”

Seras explained her plans to me.

“I’ll be back from my meeting with the Baron by one o’clock at the latest—I told him that I would be busy in the afternoon.”

Exchanging that blue dragonstone for coin might be difficult...I guess she’d rather have the Dragon-Eye Cup reward on hand in easily spendable currency.

“I’ll meet you in front of the inn around then.”

“Understood. See you then, Sir Hati.”

Seras left the food hall and set off toward the Baron’s mansion, and I returned to my room. I had watched Piggymaru for changes before going to sleep but only noticed a little extra shininess—nothing had really changed about its appearance.

Well, the book didn’t tell me to expect any. What the enhancement solution changed wasn’t its outward appearance, but something else. Might as well do some tests with Piggymaru while we wait for Seras to come back.

I wanted to try out Piggymaru’s new abilities in a wide area, somewhere with cover on all sides to keep anybody from seeing what I was doing. I went in search of somewhere away from prying eyes and settled on an alleyway the innkeeper had mentioned. It was a wide, tall area with lots of room to maneuver, but it was overgrown with shrubs and small trees, and the buildings around me seemed abandoned.

Just like the innkeeper said—these buildings used to be an inn, until the whole operation moved to the place where I’m staying now. This whole area is empty.

“Perfect. All right, Piggymaru, here we go!”

“Squee—!”

I tested Piggymaru’s abilities until around noon. When I finished, I returned to the inn for lunch, then went back outside to wait for Seras.

As I came downstairs with my things, I saw the innkeeper. “Thanks for all the help,” I said.

“Oh, Mr. Hati! Please, if you ever find yourself in Mils again, we’d love to have you back!”

“Of course, I’d be happy to.”

*Give this guy a big enough tip and he'll look the other way—
convenient for me.*

I said my thanks and walked outside.

No Seras yet.

I tucked Piggymaru into my robes and settled in to wait.

“...”

After almost an hour, Seras was still nowhere to be seen.

Chapter 4: Until We Meet Again...

I WAITED A LITTLE LONGER, expecting her to walk around the corner at any moment, but it didn't happen. My pocket watch said it was just past two.

She said she'd be back by one at the latest, didn't she? Yesterday when she came to my room, she arrived right on time—she's more punctual than this.

"What do you think we should do?" I said quietly to Piggymaru, tucked away underneath my robes.

"Sq... Squee." It was a faint, miserable-sounding cry.

"You think she already broke her promise and ran?"

"Squee."

The single tentacle I could see flushed red. No. There was no squeak to follow it up, though—Piggymaru wasn't a hundred percent sure either. Now that I'd gotten so close to Piggymaru, I could practically feel its shock.

"Maybe I misjudged her. Or maybe..." I frowned. "Something happened to Seras."

We should go find out what. Find out if I'm a good judge of character, too—two birds with one stone.

"You think she ran?"

Piggymaru squeaked softly, and the tentacle turned red again.

"Just to be sure—squeak twice for yes, once for no."

"Squeak." Piggymaru went silent after one.

"Well, I guess we can't bet who's right when we agree, huh?"

I stood up and started walking, thinking everything over while I walked through the city.

Running now wouldn't make sense for her—what would be the point? If she didn't want to come with us, she could've just turned down the bodyguard job. Is she worried because I know her true identity?

No. If that were it, she would've disappeared this morning before breakfast. She would've wanted to get away from Mils before I had a chance to tell anyone—if she planned on letting me live, that is. Was she biding her time so she could get her reward? That doesn't line up either. I gave her a blue dragonstone last night and she said they weren't available

on the public market. That implies she knows of a black market where she could sell it.

If she wanted to leave Mils in a hurry to protect her identity, yesterday night or sometime in the early morning would make more sense. Maybe the money she had on hand couldn't get her all the way to Yonato, but surely it would get her far enough to find a safe place to sell the dragonstone.

"If she's been deceiving us from the start, she's going about it all wrong."

Either way, I need to figure out what happened.

First I needed to figure out where the Baron's mansion was. "I need a more detailed map of this area..." I headed toward the main street to buy myself one.

"Hey! Didya hear about the girl who found the Dragon-Eye Cup?!"

The man wasn't talking to me, but I stopped anyway and looked back to see people gathering in the square. They looked excited, like he had big news.

"I heard it, yeah! She's the runaway Princess Knight!"

No way... What happened? How do they know?

I moved in to listen to the overlapping voices talking excitedly about the news.

Sharing this kind of gossip is fun for people—I guess human psychology works like that in every world.

"Listen to this! That Seras Ashrain went to the Baron's mansion to get her reward, and there just happened to be a famous wizard with illusion-breaking magic there on the same day! He took her disguise right off!"

"And once her disguise was gone, wouldya believe it? She looked just like the poster that's been going around of that former holy knight!"

"What?! Elves can disguise their faces?!"

"Whaddya know! The rumors were true, then!"

I recognized some of the mercenaries from clearing the ruins.

"Word has it she fled south into the Dark Forest!"

"Wh-wh-whaa?! There's gonna be a heck of a bounty on that one!"

"All right, let's go! Holy knight hunting time!"

“Enough!” boomed another mercenary from the edge of the crowd. The others turned to look at him.

“Huh?! What the heck do you want? She took our Dragon-Eye Cup! I’m taking that bounty off her dead body!”

“I said *enough*! Word’s already out, and the Baron’s men are moving in!”

“Huh?! He wants her for himself?! Tch! Who cares! I’m gonna get to her first and take the freakin’ bounty!”

“The White Walkers went after her too, you know—they almost caught her just outside the city. *Almost*. You got that?! She isn’t an enemy you want to fight! You couldn’t beat her if you wanted to!”

“What, you think I can’t take her?! Who do you think’s gonna beat her, if not us?! Yeah? Spit it out!”

“I—”

Wind beat down against the square, and I felt a sudden dark pressure overhead.

“Grraaaaaaaah!”

A high-pitched, blood-curdling shriek cut through the air like a knife.

All eyes turned to the sky.

Black dragons.

Their cries echoed through the town as the ferocious dragons and their human riders came into view, one by one, black shadows blotting out the sky. They passed over us in a second, heading toward the Dark Forest. The mercenaries who had been pumping themselves up to hunt for Seras immediately fell silent, their faces pale.

“Th...”

Finally, one of them managed to speak their name.

“The Black Dragon Knights...”

THE HIGH ELF RAN through the Dark Forest.

I never expected I'd be back here as a runaway.

She bit her lip.

I didn't expect anyone from the Wizards' Guild, either. There are so few on the continent who have the power to break illusions...what terrible luck!

No, it's karma, I suppose—balancing out all the good that has come to me of late.

Too-ka Mimori's face came to mind, and Seras felt a twinge in her chest. He wouldn't understand. Perhaps he'd think that she took the blue dragonstone and ran, or escaped to hide her identity—that she was fickle and treacherous.

She spun around, slipping a little on the wet undergrowth as she raised her sword to confront her enemy.

I can't outrun them!

She had expected the Baron's personal soldiers and the mercenary guild, but never in her worst nightmares...

“Graah! Graaaaah!”

A thundering dragon cry echoed through the Dark Forest.

The Black Dragon Knights.

She had traded blows with several of them already—they truly were the strongest knights in the world, as the rumors had promised.

If the rank-and-file members are that strong, what will I do against the elites?

The Black Dragon Knights were known for their Elite Five, but two of them were even stronger than the rest. The famous Heroic Blood Slayer, and the only person even stronger than him, the Strongest Man in the World.

He's the real reason the Black Dragon Knights are considered the strongest warriors on the continent. Not a god come down from another realm, not a descendent of heroic blood nor a hero from another world... simply the strongest that humanity has to offer, a self-made man. I've heard he has the fighting strength of an entire country all by himself!

A wyvern and its rider came rushing out of the line of trees in front of her and charged at her headfirst. Seras wrenched herself to

the side, falling backward to avoid being hit. The dragon's fangs closed on thin air with a menacing snap. One more moment and she would've been dragon food.

They aren't trying to capture me—they want to kill me!

Drool dripped from the beast's fangs onto Seras's white cheeks as it pulled back, looking down at her with murder in its red eyes.

In an instant, she spun with the spirits of the wind, using the force to spring to her feet as she drove her sword into the creature's throat. It let out an indescribable scream and crashed to the ground with a thud. Its rider jumped off as his mount went down, swiftly drawing his sword and moving in to attack. Seras was faster, though, closing in with a flash and slicing the rider's throat through a gap at the neck of his armor with her ice sword. There was always a weak point there, no matter how thick the armor was.

"Kh... Ah..."

The knight fell, spewing bloody foam from his mouth.

"Ghaaaa—!"

Another dragon knight had already appeared, bursting into the clearing in a shower of branches and leaves.

No fire-types so far...at least I don't have to worry about them burning the whole forest down.

Seras fought endlessly, cutting down each Black Dragon Knight as they came.

What do I do now? How do I escape? That illusion breaker confused the spirit of light... I can't disguise myself again until it calms down. I just have to buy myself some time.

"Lie down and die, Seras Ashrain!"

A dance of swords ensued, Seras swinging in wide curves to draw her opponent in. After several more strokes, the dragon knight reeled back in shock. *Checkmate.*

"N—!"

Slash!

It was already too late. The dragon knight screamed his last as Seras's ice sword opened his throat, sending blood and gore gushing from his neck. Without missing a beat, she jumped at his dragon mount and gave it the same ending as its master.

She wiped the sweat from her face. *I can't let my guard down.*

Seras parried the great black spear in midair as it thrust toward

her.

“—?!”

Another one. Behind me.

She spun around—and hesitated. *Too-ka... He used a similar trick, sending me off into the forest in the wrong direction. The real enemy isn't behind me—it's in front of me!*

Seras spun back with the speed of the spirit of wind and dashed into the thicket to take cover.

“You saw through my plan!”

A man stood a few meters in front of her with his sword held aloft. Something about him was different from the other dragon knights—his armor more elaborate, his sword gleaming. Even his aura seemed more menacing.

“My name is Gizun!” he announced. “I serve as vice-chief to Sir Urban, one of the Elite Five, and I'm here to kill you, Seras Ashrain! Nothing personal!”

I can't use the spirit of light right now, Seras thought frantically, meaning I also can't call on my spirit armor, since it requires all three. I have no choice but to defeat him with the tools available to me, such as they are.

Their swords collided.

Nh?! He's so much faster than I anticipated!

The sound of their fight filled the clearing, the swords clashing with blow after blow.

“I expected Bakoss to try to take me alive. You've been ordered to execute me, it seems!”

“Hmph, never intended to take you alive anyway! Ha, guess I can tell you before I kill you. We're on a special mission, see?”

They broke apart, and Gizun lowered his gaze to Seras's chest and licked his lips.

“That beautiful face! That flesh just calling out to my baser instincts! Taking you alive and keeping you like a bird in a cage would be my right as your conqueror. But no, somebody wants you dead!”

Gizun thrust wildly at her.

“Nh...?!”

He's stronger than the other dragon knights. High elves are weaker than humans to begin with, and I can't concentrate with those dragons at

my back. I need my spirit armor, or...

“No!”

Seras lost her footing and landed on her back in the mud. The black dragon behind her stretched out its wings menacingly.

“Gshaaaaaah !”

Gizun brought the flat of his sword down, catching Seras hard on the wrist.

“—?!”

She winced at the pain, and her sword fell to the ground.

“You seem tired, Seras Ashrain! You ain’t at full strength, I see! Those days on the run taking their toll on you?!”

“Nh... Oh!”

She reached blindly for her sword, but Gizun kicked it away before she reached it. In the next instant, he was on top of her, holding her down.

“I-if you’re going to kill me...do it quick,” she said, looking away.

“You know, I think I’ve changed my mind. Gotten to the point where just killing doesn’t satisfy me anymore.”

If only I had my spirit armor...but I need to calm myself first.

“Rejoice, Princess Knight from a backwater country. If I’m your first, then you’ll get a taste of a real man before I kill you. Can’t have you dying without learning what it means to be a woman, eh?”

He grabbed her wrists, twisting them upward.

“H-have you no shame? You’re a knight, are you not? To fall so far and commit such despicable acts—” Seras said as she struggled.

“Enough with your singing, little bird!”

Gizun slapped her hard across the face.

“Ngh...”

“Now you listen to me. Try anything, and my dragon’s gonna pin you down for me—with his claws. You want to do this the painless way, lie there and don’t struggle.”

“...”

“Ahh, to think the day would come I’d get to taste a beautiful and noble holy knight ! Thank the gods for all they’ve done to guide me here!” He laughed. “Let’s get down to b—”

“Paralyze!”

“Wh-wha...?”

That voice. It’s...

He appeared from the bushes, his hand extended.

“Hey,” he said. “You’re late.”

THE ROAR OF DRAGONS FILLED the air. I ran full speed toward them, easily following the sound through the forest.

This speed and stamina... I really must be getting faster with all these stat modifiers.

Seras wriggled out from under the black-armored dragon knight. I hadn't included her in my Paralyze targeting, so she could still move.

This skill is way too convenient.

"To—"

She stopped herself from saying my name. *Smart not to say it in front of an enemy.*

"Thank you for saving me." She bowed respectfully.

"I'm just glad I made it in time. So, he's one of those Black Dragon Knight guys?" I looked down at him to give Seras some privacy as she fixed her clothes.

"Yes—a knight of the Bakoss Empire."

"Huh. Is he one of the Elite Five, do you think?"

"No, he told me he was vice-chief to one of them."

I looked over at Seras, who was now standing beside me. "Are you okay? Looks like he gave you some trouble."

"Why did you come here?" asked Seras, staring down at the frozen dragon knight. She still looked wary of him, even paralyzed.

"Poison."

Non-lethal for now, at least for him. Lethal mode for the dragon mount.

Dragon knight dealt with, I turned back to Seras to answer.

"There were rumors flying all over Mils—people had a pretty good idea of where you'd run off to. I came to find you."

Seras's expression grew more serious and dark.

"That's not what I'm trying to ask. I want to know wh—"

"I waited for you," I interrupted her.

"Sorry?"

"Sleep," I said, knocking the knight and his dragon unconscious. *Don't want them hearing what we're about to say.*

Seras looked down at the ground sheepishly.

“I-I’m sorry, I didn’t realize... Why did you come here?”

“I hired you as my bodyguard, didn’t I? From what I heard in Mils, you didn’t run away and betray me or anything. So I came to get you.”

“Squee! ♪”

Piggymaru squeaked happily, popping out of my robes.

“D-don’t you understand? If you stay with me, you...”

“You’re being hunted by the Black Dragon Knights, right?”

“Th-that’s right. You need to get away from me as fast as you can. The man lying here is the only one who knows about you. You can still run and save yourself!”

“Can’t you just give yourself a new face again and come with me?”

“I could, but... My spirit of light was confused by the illusion breaker at the Baron’s mansion. I cannot draw on its power at the moment.”

“When will you be able to calm it down?”

“I...don’t know.” Seras took a small pouch from her bag.

“I’m sorry, but you must allow me to cancel our contract. Please, take this blue dragonstone back.” Seras looked pained as she laid a hand on her chest. “If you stay with me, I’ll only put you in more danger!”

“To be honest, I just don’t want the trouble.”

“E-exactly! Staying with me will bring you nothing but trouble!”

I scratched my head.

“No, I mean I don’t want the trouble of finding another bodyguard. It’ll be tough to find one as skilled as you.”

“...”

Seras was speechless for a moment, but she quickly recovered and doubled down.

“H-head north, and you’ll find the capital of Ulza. There will be plenty of capable mercenaries for you to hire there! If you need more money, I can tell you of a place where you’ll be able to exchange this blue dragonstone for coin, and—”

I figured she knew some way to exchange gemstones.

“Hey, Seras, whose problem do you think this is?”

“P-problem...?”

“The reason you want to cancel the contract. Is it my problem or yours?”

“It is *entirely* my problem.”

“Then why should I care about it? I accept the terms as they stand.”

“Sir Hati!”

“If we’re going to do this, you should take off your clothes.”

Seras froze, her eyes opened wide in shock.

“What?”

I took off my backpack and showed her a set of women’s clothes I’d bought earlier.

“They might not fit perfectly, but I brought you this change of clothes. Everybody’s going to remember what you were wearing—you should change before we set off again.”

“Ah, s-so that’s what you meant...” Seras blushed.

Huh? Oh, I get it...

“Sorry, I didn’t make myself clear there, did I.”

“I was a little taken aback for a moment, and...” Seras trailed off, then suddenly remembered that we’d been arguing.

“W-wait a minute now! You’re ignoring me and assuming we’re going to move on together! Have you even been listening? My problems are far more serious than you seem to understand!”

Seras looked down at the dragon knight, twitching in his sleep.

“I know how strong the Black Dragon Knights are,” I said. “They’re the best on the continent, right? I get it. We need to run and hide.”

Seras remained silent.

Looks like I need to push harder.

“Can I ask why you’re going to Yonato?”

For a moment she was quiet.

“There is a port there where I could purchase passage to the west. I need money to pay for that journey,” she confessed.

“So, you aren’t actually joining this holy order thing?”

“I’m not. I apologize for lying to you.”

Not surprising. I figured as much.

“So basically, you just need a safe place to hide.”

“That is correct. It’s...” Seras clutched a hand to her chest, “the last order *she* gave me.”

Sounds like she had somebody who guided her before she had to go on the run.

“I have an idea—why don’t we ask the Forbidden Witch if she can hide you?”

“Th-the Forbbiden Witch...?”

“Nobody knows exactly where she is, do they? She must be great at keeping herself hidden.”

“I suppose so...”

We can always give her some blue dragonstones in exchange. To be honest, that lie-detecting spirit that Seras has with her could come in really handy in future, especially when we meet this witch. Seras is easy to work with, too—I might not get so lucky with someone else.

I looked Seras straight in the eyes.

“We should find the Forbidden Witch to figure out how she conceals herself so well. The Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters is so dangerous that people try not to travel through there, right?”

There are dangerous monsters all over the place, but I can probably take them all down with my skills—and I’ll be even safer with Seras by my side.

“I need to go through the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters to find somebody who can read the ancient language on these scrolls. And if there aren’t many people there, it’d be a great place to hide.”

“You might be right, but...”

“Will you continue on as my bodyguard, then?”

“Sir Too-ka...why does it have to be me?”

I hesitated a moment. “You remind me of my foster mother.”

“Your foster mother?”

“Yeah. I was abandoned by my real parents, and my foster parents took me in and raised me. To my real parents, I was a burden and they resented me, but my foster parents were so kind and gentle. I’ll never forget what they did for me—they’re amazing people.”

The memories came flooding back, and I couldn’t help but keep talking.

“You don’t look or sound like her, and you have different personalities, but...you feel the same to me, somehow.”

How you're smart, but you rush into danger without thinking.

Seras will be a good bodyguard, and her spirits' abilities might be useful. But if I'm honest, the real reason I'm here is...

"If I just walked away from you, it would feel like I was walking away from her. It wouldn't feel right."

Seras smiled, her face lit up, almost dazzling.

"Sir Too-ka...you really are kind."

"I'm just...a little partial to people who remind me of my foster mother."

The dragon mount finally breathed its last. I didn't level up.

"Anyway...I hope we can get some useful information out of this guy," I said, gesturing to the unconscious dragon knight.

I released the paralysis on the dragon knight's head and dispelled Sleep. There was still plenty of time left on the paralysis gauge.

"Augh! I... It hurts! It's burning me!"

I looked down at the man, unable to die from my poison.

Given what he was saying and doing before I paralyzed him, this guy's bad news. Not to mention that he's already seen my face. No reason not to kill him.

"Answer our questions truthfully and I'll save you," I said lightly.

I'm not lying—I'll turn that non-lethal setting off and save you from your suffering.

I asked about the Black Dragon Knights—their current condition, strength, location, movements, and future plans.

"You got anything you want to ask?" I asked Seras.

"Who asked you to take my life?" she said.

"Wh-where... Where are the others?"

He'd ignored her question. I took a deep breath.

"I killed them all on my way here."

"I-impossible!" He moaned in pain. "You? You freakin' brat... How are you doing this? Who are you?!"

"You hit the nail on the head—I'm just some *freakin' brat*."

"Don't think you're going to get away with messing with the Black Dragon Knights! Aggh... You too, holy knight scum! Heh... Heh heh... After they catch you, you're gonna make a great pet for them.

The women you tried to protect in Neah were delicious, too!”

Seras got down on one knee and stared coldly at the knight.

“I’m asking you again. On whose orders are you here?”

He looked taken aback.

“F-fine! I want to see her face when the Holy Knight of Neah learns the truth—”

A chill ran down my spine.

“Seras!”

Thunk!

A white spear flew from the heavens and pierced Gizun’s skull, killing him instantly. Seras and I jerked back and looked up to the sky—it was all we could do to react.

“What just happened?!”

Three dragons, larger than the one that lay at our feet, cast looming shadows against the sunset. Somewhere in the mass of wings and flesh was *something* else.

Out of range of any of my skills.

“Seras Ashrain.”

The voice was cold and booming, ringing in my ears.

A man all in white. White clothes, white hair, and a white dragon as his mount. His eyes were a piercing, vivid red.

I looked over at Seras, who stood rooted to the spot in shock.

“I-it can’t be...” she said.

“My name is Civit,” said the white dragon knight. For some reason, he seemed not to be speaking to Seras, but to me. “But I have heard the rabble call me by another name. They say it fits me better,” he said, sounding indifferent. “They call me the Strongest Man in the World.”



ORTOLA STRAUMSS—once ruler of the Holy Empire of Neah—was tortured by nightmares, his unconscious mind revisiting what he couldn't bear to think of in the day. Days gone by, when he still had the strength to stand and fight...

The Holy Empire of Neah and the Bakoss Empire were separated by a long collection of ruins, forming a rough border between them. The golden-eyed monsters came pouring from the ground and the two nations rose as one to fight. Ortola rallied his troops to confront the enemy, just as the Bakoss had done, but Neah arrived too late to the fight. When Ortola arrived on the battlefield, he couldn't believe his eyes—it was as if some vengeful god had sent their wrath from above and created a hell on earth.

Amongst the wreckage stood a young man with fiery red eyes, drenched in the blood of the monsters he'd slain. He reveled in the carnage, ripping the fearsome golden-eyed monsters limb from limb like they were children's toys and mocking the monsters who tried to flee from him.

"Why do you run?! Have you no pride?! Fiendish monsters indeed, bringing shame to your fallen comrades! Why won't you face me?!"

The young man cut the monsters down one by one, drenching himself in their blood, crying out in despair, grief-stricken and alone. He wanted enemies—Ortola would learn that soon enough.

The young man looked at him. Even now, Ortola could remember those piercing red eyes. Civit saw a ruler, and he expected strength.

He approached Ortola—nobody tried to stop him, because nobody could. The young man stared at the emperor with a burning, raging desire to fight, but it faded to nothing in an instant.

"You're weak." His voice faltered and his eyes dropped, as if he were disappointed to his very core. When he raised his head again, he stretched his arm toward Ortola.

"Give them to me."

His expression was deadly serious.

“Give me the strongest your country has to offer.”

“Aaah—!”

Ortola jerked awake in his silent bedroom, his skin prickling with cold sweat.

He was in a lakeside mansion in the southern part of the empire. Since the Bakoss invasion, the former Emperor of Neah lived a quiet life in “retirement.” To the north lay his former domain, his palace taken over by the Black Dragon Knights. The better half of Neah territory had been allotted to them.

The Black Dragon Knights...that young man is their leader now. What a terrifying thought.

Several years after that day on the battlefield, the Goddess Vicius visited Neah, and Ortola and Civit Gartland met once more. During her visit, monsters came pouring from the ruins east of the capital. Some had human shapes and roamed the countryside, spreading fear and destruction wherever they went. Most of the knights of Neah were away from the capital, and too few remained to handle the outbreak.

“I’m afraid there’s no other way—I will deal with the problem personally. It’s lucky for you that I’m here to save the day, Emperor Ortola,” the Goddess said. Her words sent a wave of relief through him.

Those humanoid monsters are incredibly dangerous—my knights would have suffered heavy losses in battle against them.

Ortola had his doubts whether mortal humans could really defeat such foes.

But the Goddess? She’ll be able to protect us from them...

He would dispatch what troops he had to the area, of course—appearances needed to be maintained—but they wouldn’t have to bear the brunt of the fighting.

When they hurried to the ruins to confront the monsters, though, Ortola couldn’t have imagined what he would find.

It was a mountain of death—a mountain of monster corpses, already being set upon by the birds. It was a waking nightmare made of rotting flesh. In the midst of the heap, he saw human faces twisted in terrible agony, now frozen that way in death.

“Did he...do all this...?”

There the young man stood, silent and resentful, plunging his spear into the skulls one by one, as if none of it had been enough for him.

“Give me the strongest your country has to offer,” he said, didn’t he? He’s grown in both age and power, and now...now he is perfect.

“Is he even still human?” Ortola was so shocked that the words slipped out before he could think better of it.

“That is Civit Gartland, Strongest Man in the World. He has no divine blood, no heroic ancestry...it may even be beyond my powers to explain his strength to you,” the Goddess said, smiling absently.

“If the evil ever rises again, I will return to Alion and summon heroes from another world to defeat it, yet I fear that for raw power, none will surpass Civit Gartland. I have no doubt that someday soon, he will rise to lead the Black Dragon Knights.”

She looked at the white-haired young man, who had a dark craving flashing in his red eyes.

“Someday he may truly live up to his potential and cause, well... I’m not sure. Civit Garland is quite incomprehensible, even for the divine such as I.”

“Th-that much... That man, he...”

Even from the Goddess’s perspective, he’s a monster.

Ortola was terrified to have him as a neighbor.

“Ah, but the captain of your Band of Holy Knights is quite the talented individual herself, is she not? I’ve heard such good things about her.”

Ortola shook his head, letting the memories fade. Getting out of bed, he tied his gown lightly around his waist. His terrible premonition had come true, and the Bakoss Empire now completely controlled what had once been his territory. Despite that, he believed the worst had been avoided.

I still think about...

He covered his face with both hands, picturing her face—the captain of his Holy Knights.

Oh, Seras...

When the Black Dragon Knights came, she fled the capital. From what he’d heard, she was still on the run.

I don’t regret letting you escape me. Not regret, but...

The thought of her in trouble made him sick. He had no idea if she was even safe. He let out a stifled groan, pangs of regret stabbing at his chest.

No...I must've made the wrong choice. How did it come to this?

"I should've taken her. Forced myself onto her if I had to!"

His daughter, the princess, had always kept men away from Seras, even Ortola himself. She was a holy knight of the realm—no man could have her.

The holy knight vow of chastity had been his daughter's idea to begin with. Ortola had only ever interacted with Seras in public—the ways and times they might meet were limited by his position as Emperor. Ortola was always uncomfortable around his daughter, even afraid of her, and Seras was always by her side. He had no choice but to give up on the knight.

Ahh...

Whenever he thought of her, his body came alive at the memory. Her body, those seductive flowing lines, her soft, pink lips... Those breasts, barely covered despite the best efforts of her tailor... Her silky voice gently caressing his ears... The sweet, unmistakable scent of a woman. She was sophisticated and kind, and above all that, beautiful beyond compare. Seras Ashrain stirred something in the loins of even the withered, dried-up Emperor when she passed him by.

I can't have it...

Above all, he was terrified of her being somebody else's.

She should be mine. She offered her sword to me. By rights, she's my property. In the days when I truly ruled this realm, that was enough to satisfy me, but now...now I can only quench my burning desire for her in my fantasies. I try to be satisfied with this, and yet...

He began to weep.

She could always tell the truth from lies. I tried my best to act the noble emperor in her presence, but in truth, I'm just a coward.

Now Seras was gone, a runaway from his lands, lost by his own daughter. He'd known Princess Cattlea intended to send Seras away, but he let it happen anyway.

I would sooner die than see her in the hands of those Bakoss thugs... or so I thought back then. I wanted a peaceful, long life for her—some beautiful thing living out her days far away from this place...

He clenched his hands in the fabric of his dressing gown.

But I...

“I can’t do it.”

He couldn’t forgive her. He could *not* let it end like this.

Sooner or later, she’ll be captured and defiled by some other man. I cannot bear to think of it...!

She would never return to him. She would never be his.

Someone else is bound to take her, and I...I will never be free from this torment!

His head dropped.

“Seras...” he mumbled.

The former Holy Emperor brought his hands together in prayer.

“This is my final wish. Please, I beg of you...” His voice was hoarse, strained but resolute. “Die! Disappear from this world and never return!”



“CIVIT GARTLAND?!” said Seras, gripping her sword and preparing to fight.

I guess he's as famous as he thinks he is, huh?

“And...the Elite Five?!”

Just four of them up there, though...one's missing.

Civit held another white spear aloft, pulled from the leather quiver on his dragon's harness. He had a sword at his belt, too, still in its scabbard. He'd come prepared for a fight.

“I shut him up, Orban,” said Civit, never taking his eyes off me.

The blond man on his left, Orban, scratched his head. “Yeah, but did you have to kill him?” Orban's skin was dark, his face well-proportioned and handsome. He wore a sly frown.

“He shouldn't have let the girl best him. I imagine Ortola's desire piqued his interest.” Civit's red eyes were unwavering, his face completely expressionless.

Orban looked down at Gizun's corpse.

“Selfish, greedy, easy to manipulate...I'm gonna miss him,” Orban said.

“That's your problem. He was in my way—killing him was the easiest way to get him out of it.”

“Gizun was always focused on what he wanted. Had a feeling he wouldn't make it through this mission. Maybe I shouldn't've brought him after all, huh?”

“He was clearly past his prime. If he'd been able to dodge that spear, I would've rescued him.”

He was paralyzed when you skewered him—he couldn't have dodged even if he wanted to. Not that he would have stood a chance against a spear that fast.

A single bead of sweat rolled off my jaw.

They haven't noticed my paralysis skill yet.

I looked over at Seras. She was clearly overwhelmed.

“E-Emperor Ortola?”

Sounds like this Ortola guy was the ruler of Neah. Why's the emperor she once served trying to kill her? What did Gizun say before he died? He wanted to see her face when she learned the truth. Was he trying to tell her

about Ortola?

I couldn't understand it. From the look of it, Seras couldn't either.

"The old man's still got quite the fortune stashed away, y'see. He says he'll give us all of it if we bring you to him. Those hidden vaults of his are full of things I'd like to get my hands on."

"Why didn't you just torture the location out of him?" asked Seras. As he answered, Civit's gaze remained fixed on me, as it had been ever since he threw his first spear.

"He's got a strange stubborn streak. Crazy, if you ask me—and torturing a crazy man won't get you anywhere. No, he won't tell us where they are until we give him what he wants. You." Civit laughed mirthlessly. "Delusions and desire are a terrible mix."

"Pfah! You saw through the man so fast it was terrifying!" the dragon knight on Civit's right broke in. "Leaving Orban's personal opinions aside, Commander Civit, would you remind me of our orders regarding Seras Ashrain?"

"Yeah, what'd His Majesty say?" said the other.

"We're to capture her and deal with her," responded Civit.

"He knows us too well. He ain't no fighter, but he's a good ruler, that one."

"How should we proceed, Commander Civit? It might be good for morale to pass her around before we execute her. Gizun might've had the right idea about that."

"That's not gonna work, Schweiz," Orban interrupted.

"Why not? What do you mean?"

"Ortola told us to bring the corpse back clean—said if there'd been any men on her, he'd be able to *smell* it. Gross and creepy as hell, but if he wants a corpse back, who knows what he's into. I tell ya, the guy's gone off the deep end!"

Schweiz, the middle-aged dragon knight on Civit's right, gave a grunt of disgust.

"Ugh. Very well," he said plainly, accepting Orban's logic.

Schweiz looked tough—almost bearlike. He was heavysset and had a thick, short beard, dark brown hair, and a black eye patch over his left eye. But there was nothing wild or feral about him—his calm baritone voice and cunning manner gave the impression of a noble at court, the kind who'd do anything to come out on top. His dragon mount was roughly the same size as Orban's.

“It appears we can’t let her live, then. I apologize—it was a distasteful suggestion to begin with. Forgive me.”

“What are you talking about?!” demanded Seras, her voice ringing with indignation. “The gentle Emperor Ortola would never say such things! Enough of your lies. I will not stand here and allow you to insult my emperor!”

Orban smirked.

“Even I feel bad for you, little Princess Knight! The fighting stance, the righteous indignation...when you know the truth like we do, it’s just so dang funny! I guess the old man likes the faithful and innocent type, yeah? You’re pretty, though, I’ll give him that much.” His smirk became a grin. “The old man says he can’t die in peace as long as you’re alive.”

“I-impossible! What do you *really* want with me?!”

She’s bluffing. She must know they’re telling the truth—her powers must be showing her. That’s what’s throwing her so off balance.

Seras looked like she was on the verge of tears.

“E-Emperor Ortola... He would never...”

She fell to her knees. Schweitz looked down indifferently.

“What should we do with her, Commander Civit?” he asked.

“Isn’t it obvious? Give her a chance to win her freedom.”

“As always. Understood,” Schweitz said, nodding curtly. “Seras Ashrain will do battle with Commander Civit—if she wins, she is free to go. Sir Orban, is that acceptable to you?”

“So long as this little holy knight dies nice and pretty, I don’t care! ♪ I already know how this ends.”

“We shall see,” said a voice. It was the first time the dragon knight on the far left spoke. His whole body was covered in bandages, with his armor strapped over the top. His voice sounded male, though you couldn’t tell from looking at him. Only his left eye was visible through the thick white cloth.

“Holy Empire of Neah, former captain of the Holy Knights... She’s famous for her spirit armor.”

“I have, of course, heard the tales—why else would I be here? I wish to fight against this spirit armor!” said Civit. He paused and looked at me even more intensely. “Or so I thought. And yet...”

Schweitz frowned, wrinkling his brow.

“Commander Civit?”

“For some reason, I find myself looking past Seras Ashrain right now. That young man interests me.”

“I noticed your interest, naturally, but...what about him do you find interesting? No doubt he’s some inconsequential porter in Seras’s employ.”

“You’re wrong, Schweitz. That one’s interesting.”

Civit smiled at me, red eyes anticipating...something.

“Who are you?” he asked.

I froze. In the Mils ruins I was almost too careful, unable to tell which foes should be feared and which I could beat easily. This time was different—I looked up and saw the great dragons towering above me, their wingspans so wide that they blocked out the sun.

Right now, there’s a knife pressed to my throat. One wrong move, one clumsy attack, and Civit will kill me in an instant.

The Strongest Man in the World—Civit Gartland. My animal instincts screamed at me that the name wasn’t just for show. This guy is stronger than the Soul Eater.

Ever since he’d appeared in the sky, I’d been dripping anxious sweat.

If I make the wrong move, this all ends here. Life and death. Survive or perish.

It’s all up to me.

But why...? This happened in the Ruins of Disposal, too. I’m staring death in the face, but I...

“Why are you laughing?” asked Civit.

Why am I laughing? I always laugh in tense situations.

“Hey, Civit Gartland,” I said.

All right. He hasn’t attacked me yet. I can feel it—he wants to talk. I don’t think I can raise my arm, but I can keep him talking, and that’s enough for now.

“I’d like to have a chat. How ’bout it?”

Civit’s expression softened. He looked almost amused.

As long as I don't give it away when I'm about to activate a skill, then...

"Very well. Allow me to first ask your name."

All right. A battle of wits with the Strongest Man in the World.

"Hati Skoll."

He shut me down immediately. "I see—a pseudonym."

"Yeah...it is."

"I suppose you need to hide your true identity, just like that Princess Knight you travel with."

"Commander Civit." It was Schweitz.

"What is it?"

"I simply cannot comprehend what you find interesting about that young man."

"You don't think it strange? He's face to face with the Elite Five, and he isn't even scared of us."

"Is that so? He seems...very sweaty."

"That's not fear. Look more closely. He hasn't yet lost his will to fight. He's waiting for something—an opportunity, perhaps."

"An opportunity to strike at you? With what? He could never get through a full incantation, and it would be a feat for even magical items to hit us all the way up here."

"He knows if he makes the wrong move, I'll kill him in a second. Even then, he laughs—and asks to talk! Not to beg for his life in surrender, but simply to converse with me. I have to say, this is refreshing."

Schweitz looked taken aback, but Civit's frown had softened.

"The little weaklings down there are trying to come up with a way to squirm out of this situation. They know I'm the Strongest Man in the World, and yet still they try."

He's smart...perceptive, too.

"Don't you think it's intriguing, Schweitz?"

"Indeed, now that you mention it."

"We've found ourselves on an unexpected stage, and it's far too early for the curtain call. I wish to perform a little longer." He was still watching me intently. "Seras Ashrain no longer interests me as a potential foe. I don't think she'd be much of a challenge."

"She looks pretty messed up, too, after learning of Ortola's

orders.”

They're giving me a lot of information to use against them just from listening to their conversation. I can't just stand here silently though. Civit Gartland hasn't dropped his guard once.

Don't panic—one mistake, and...

“I have a question,” I said, choosing my timing carefully.

“Very well. Ask away.”

“You're looking for an enemy who can satisfy you in battle, right?”

“Correct.”

“Aren't there tons of opponents for you to fight? Like the Demon King's armies, for a start?”

“It would be difficult to do battle with them now.”

“Why?”

“The problem is Magnar.”

That's the country on the front lines, on the far north of the continent...

“The King of Magnar doesn't want foreign troops marching through his land. The Nightwall may be gone, but as long as his White Wolf Knights survive, he will accept no help from his neighbors, least of all from the Bakoss Empire after our invasion. I hope to someday face their chief rider in single combat, though, that I grant you.”

“Why not now? You're the strongest man on the continent. Why not do whatever you want?”

“I am the leader of the Black Dragon Knights. I have obligations to the Emperor of Bakoss and my position in the house of Gartland. There's no room to act recklessly, especially when it comes to diplomacy—regrettable as that may be.”

“Foreign affairs are such complex matters—and of course, while we are the strongest knights on the continent, we could hardly defeat every country if they were to rise up and unite against us,” Schweitz added.

The strongest man in the world, but risk of reprisal keeps him from being the most powerful. Civit can't just kill whoever he likes. His love of country and family are chains around his neck, holding him back. That lack of freedom might be precisely what makes him crave a worthy foe.

“Why don't you fight the Goddess? Vicius, of Alion?”

I need to find out what he thinks of her.

“The Goddess Vicius, eh? I have no quarrels with the gods for now, and there are strong ties between our two countries. It’s true I have no love for the Goddess myself, but...” Civit’s eyes flashed red. “Those other-world heroes she is known to summon—I have great hopes for them in the future.”

He’s talking about us—2-C. I knew he’d be interested.

“The holy priests of Yonato, Mira’s Wildly Beautiful Emperor, Ulza’s Dragonslayer... Surely there are other suitable enemies you could—”

“No. The blessed power of those heroes from another world, explosive growth that could rival even my own...I hope they can someday be worthy foes for me. Those others don’t compare.”

“Do you think the Goddess will allow you to fight them?”

“Once the fight against the Demon King is over, surely she’ll offer me one or two. Of course...” He lowered his voice. “Should the Demon King’s armies rip through the White Wolf Knights, annihilate Alion’s heroes, and tear the Goddess to shreds, we wouldn’t complain.”

I felt his supreme self-confidence oozing from every word.

He figures he’ll just fight whoever’s left—doesn’t matter who, as long as they’re the strongest.

“Come to think of it, there’s a rather deep connection between you and Alion, is there not, Seras Ashrain?” added Civit, almost to himself.

Seras looked up at him, her brow furrowed.

“To what are you referring? I have no such...”

She stopped, seeming to realize something. Civit sighed.

“A gift for one who’s about to die. Let me tell you why Neah fell,” he said, entirely disinterested. “Why did we suddenly invade the Holy Empire of Neah after holding back for so long? The reason was you, Seras Ashrain.”

“What? Y-you invaded...b-because of me...?”

It was obvious that Seras was completely bewildered. Schweitz looked down on her with pity.

“It appears she wasn’t told a thing.”

“N-nonsense! Why, in the name of all that is holy, would I be the cause of your invasion?!”

“Schweitz,” said Civit, sounding bored. Schweitz nodded, taking

his cue to explain.

“The Goddess Vicius wanted you, Seras Ashrain.”

What? That foul Goddess wanted her? Why?

I looked over at Seras, who seemed as confused as I was.

“Why would the Goddess of Alion want me?” she asked.

“I believe it was back when she first predicted the Demon King’s arrival. She asked Ortola to give you up.”

“But why me?”

“I don’t know the reason. I do know of the Cult of Vicius, though, and the followers who do her bidding. I suspect you were chosen to become one of their order,” Schweitz explained.

“But I’ve never heard so much as a whisper about that!”

“Ortola forbade anyone to speak of it ever again.”

“The emperor? Then he wishes to kill me for my sin of inciting the invasion?”

No, that can’t be right—it doesn’t make sense. There must be another reason that old man wants Seras dead, some reason why he wasn’t willing to hand her over in the first place. Would losing the captain of his Holy Knights be that heavy a blow?

No—Civit and his men up there have already told me everything I need to know. Calling him crazy, talking about his desires and how he wanted the corpse to be clean... He was too stubborn to hand her over, and now that she’s out of his hands, he wants wants to destroy her. He wants to own her, and if he can’t have that, he wants her dead. Sounds crazy to me. How’s it fair to blame Seras for starting the war, anyway? That foul Goddess and crazy old Emperor are to blame if anybody is.

Schweitz looked off into the distance for a long moment before answering.

“It’s said that all-out war on the continent has only been avoided because of the work the Goddess of Alion does behind the scenes. We haven’t attacked Ulza because of the peace treaty we have with them. The Goddess’s influence stretches far—her fingerprints are all over this world.”

A peace treaty between Ulza and Bakoss—I heard something about that back in Mils.

“So if we were to refuse her requests and ignore her invitations, well...I’m sure you can guess what would happen.”

The peace treaty only works because the Goddess put her influence

behind it—if that changes, there’s no telling what could happen. She likely approved the Neah invasion personally, or it wouldn’t have happened either.

“N-no...” Seras murmured, clearly horrified.

“The Goddess must no longer have a use for you—that was your downfall. Now you’re disposable, no use to anyone.”

Orban laughed.

“The Holy Knights are real beauties, that’s for sure. Ain’t you interested in them, Civit, buddy?”

“Sure, they’re beautiful in an aesthetic sense, but only the strong are truly beautiful in my eyes. The sweetest nectar I’ve ever sipped is the strength of a deserving foe.”

“Hmph...I guess no matter what they’re into, the beautiful drive the powerful crazy. That Neah royal family’s got it *bad*.”

“What about the princess?” asked Seras. The question burst out of her like she couldn’t stop herself.

“Princess Cattlea, you mean?” Schweitz said.

“Is she...safe?” Seras seemed to struggle to get the words out.

“Commander Civit will probably take her as his wife soon enough.”

“What?!”

“The Emperor’s wishes. A political marriage to ensure peace between our countries. Though he wants to delay our union until after the threat of the Demon King has been dealt with.”

“The princess...”

“She’s rather strong-willed but physically weak. I have no desire for her as a woman. I would much rather take the Princess Knight as a wife—at least she can fight.”

Civit Gartland is really fixated on strength, huh?

“But Seras Ashrain will die today. Let us ensure your body makes it back to the princess’s arms in one piece.”

“How *could* you?”

“That’s enough from you, weakling,” Civit said sharply. “If you must be upset, be upset with your own failings. Your own weakness will cause your death.” He didn’t even bother to look at her.

“You never had a chance, so accept your death silently and you might earn a sliver of respect from me. Nothing bores me more than those who struggle and flail when confronted with death. And instead

of fighting for your country, you ran. I'd rather fight a single weak warrior who'll stand and fight over a thousand cowards."

Civit laughed, his dragon's form outlined by the soft sunset light.

"It should go without saying, but...I would love to someday find a warrior willing to stand against me."

That's all I needed to hear. I've found it—my path to survival.

He shook his head. "Stop buying time. What are you planning over there, young man?"

"Civit Gartland. You want an enemy who'll stand up to you, right?"

"I do."

Don't panic. You can do this. Don't back down.

"I'll be that enemy."

"You're going to fight me? You and what army?" Civit looked him up and down. "You stand before the Elite Five, yet you seem unafraid. I can *feel* your fighting spirit. Where does that confidence come from? You don't appear to be bluffing, so...what are you hiding?"

"As you suspect—I am hiding something."

"Tell me now, or my spear will get it out of you."

I let out a long sigh.

The blessed power of the heroes from another world? Explosive growth that could rival even your own, was it?

He raised an eyebrow.

"I'll tell you my secret."

Civit was smiling wide, showing his teeth.

"My real name is Too-ka Mimori."

This is it. No turning back now.

"I'm a hero, summoned here from another world."

Seras gasped softly.

"I see." Civit looked shocked. "So that's what I felt..."

"Sir Too-ka...you're a hero?"

A chorus of surprised comments followed.

"Whoa! A hero from another world?!"

"I heard that the summoning was already complete, but I never

expected to meet one here. What are you doing in this land?" asked Civit, voice booming.

He can see through lies—it must be a power similar to Seras's. He knew immediately that the name I gave was a pseudonym. I can't get away with a bald-faced lie...I need to tell the "truth."

"I'm a little different from the other heroes I was summoned with—unique and acting alone. The Goddess sent me here."

"Hmph. You don't appear to be lying."

Sweat poured down my face.

I'm unique among the summoned heroes. I'm acting alone. I was sent here by the Goddess.

No lies there. How Civit interprets them is his problem, not mine.

"Why are you acting alone? Did the Goddess give you some special mission out here?"

I should avoid answering yes or no questions...

"I'm on a different level from the others, you see," I answered confidently.

"Oh?"

Civit's eyes narrowed, expectant.

I'm an E-class hero, so yeah, that's a different level.

"That's why I'm here by myself."

"So, the Goddess recognized you were special."

"She knows I'm in a different class."

"Interesting. So, what do you want from me, hero?"

I left a long pause to emphasize what I was about to say.

"Time."

He laughed. "In other words, you wish me to let you go free?"

"Yes."

"Why would I do such a thing? What's in it for me?"

"I'm going to become stronger than you—then I'm going to kill you."

He looked shaken, but his mouth twitched, then twisted into an irrepressible smile.

"You're going to kill me?"

"I'm a hero, aren't I? I might become just as strong as you once

I've leveled up a bit."

I'm trying to seem rough and challenging...but logical. I might eventually be just as strong as Civit—that's what Mimori Too-ka believes right now.

I tried to imagine what Civit saw when he looked at me.

"This young man...he truly believes he might one day be capable of challenging me. Interesting indeed."

"I'm going to be stronger than anybody else. Powerful enough to annihilate anything and anyone, even that Goddess."

"Hmph. How do you intend to do that? I believe heroes have to kill golden-eyed monsters to—"

"We're headed to the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters," I interrupted.

Civit was growing more and more excited—he had obviously expected that answer.

"That is where you intend to level up, I take it?"

I laughed evasively.

"Maybe."

"Surely the Goddess could have provided you with suitable monsters to train with?"

"I was asked to walk a different path than the others—that's why she gave me my freedom."

The Goddess did say she'd leave me alone if I ever made it out.

"She isn't going to interfere with my journey—she just wants the job done."

"She has no stipulations as to how you defeat the Demon King, so long as you ultimately do so?"

I shrugged. "Something like that."

"Hmm... She must've found you difficult to deal with."

Civit's eyes flashed with delight.

"My stats—my power level right now—they aren't that high. I probably look like a weakling to you. But someday I'm going to come back and beat the hell out of you, Strongest Man in the World. You know what that means, right?"

"It means I should let you go?"

"It does."

“How do I know you’ll come back to face me?”

“Don’t worry. I’m coming back to see the Goddess once I’m done.”

“Hmph. I don’t suppose the Goddess would let such a capable hero go if she was worried you might disappear.”

“I need to get back to her anyway, in the end. I can’t leave this world without seeing her again.”

For revenge.

“Very well.” Civit’s voice was clear. “I want to see what kind of hero you become—what the Goddess saw in you that was so different. And then, I want to fight you to the death.”

“As do I,” I answered.

I took a step forward.

“Someday we’ll settle this, Civit Gartland, just you and me!”

He looked thrilled.

“You’re so weak, and yet you stir such emotion within me. That fighting spirit! That murderous intent! It’s magnificent!” Civit declared. “I will let you live, Too-ka Mimori.”

“Hah, of course you will.”

“Leave this place at once. After Seras Ashrain has been snuffed out, we will be on our way as well.”

I could practically feel Seras holding her breath.

“I can’t let that happen.”

“What?”

“I need her for my journey.”

“She’s taking you into the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters, you mean?”

“At my level, I still need help. You understand, don’t you?”

“Ah. She weakens the monsters and you deal the final blow, I take it.”

“She might not be worthy of facing you, but you have to admit she’s strong.”

“Don’t you need to report her to the Goddess? Seras Ashrain’s presence has been requested by the very one who summoned you into this world. She may have lost interest already, but maybe not. Don’t you risk her wrath by keeping her location secret? I need not remind you what happened to Neah when they provoked the Goddess’s fury.”

“Who cares?!” I said, taking another step forward.

Civit looked confused.

“I don’t need to report a thing to that Goddess!” I laughed loudly. “I’ll use whoever I need to. Who cares what some Goddess thinks of me?! I’m only using Seras Ashrain to grow strong. That’s all I care about!”

“Hah!” Civit threw his head back and laughed. “Hah... Ha ha ha ha ha hah! Marvelous, Too-ka Mimori! That’s it! Perfect! Throw off the yoke of tedious reason and pursue true strength! Oh, it’s been so long since I met someone like you—one brave enough to speak to me like that!”

As I expected—he appreciates it when people stand up to him. He’s practically overjoyed at my defiance.

“Very well—I will grant you clemency. Seras Ashrain may go free as well.”

Orban was stunned.

“Eh?! Wh—?! Civit ?? W-wait, buddy! You’re seriously gonna let the little holy knight go too?”

“Too-ka needs her for his journey. I can kill her after he and I have battled. We’ll finish her sooner or later—all this changes is the time and place.”

“B-but c’mon! We already went through all this trouble finding her, y’know?! What if she gets eaten by monsters and we can’t even get her corpse? Or she disappears somewhere and we—”

“Silence! I’ll kill you, Orban.” Civit roared the words at him, voice sharp as a knife.

“Wh—?!” Orban shrank back, his face pale.

The murderous intent Civit was giving off sent shivers down my spine. Even the other members of the Elite Five looked scared for a moment.

Now is not the time. Get off my stage, Civit’s roar seemed to say.

The only member of the Black Dragon Knights with real authority was Civit Gartland—convince him, and the others will fall in line.

“It seems you’ve been granted a reprieve, Seras Ashrain,” he said. “You are a tool of Too-ka’s now, to be used until you’re worn out and used up. Bring me a finished Too-ka, a *strong* Too-ka, or, let’s see...I’ll hurt that little princess of yours.”

“Oh!”

“Bring him to me as a worthy opponent, and I’ll kill you so fast you won’t even feel it. You have my word.”

“—Sir Too-ka.”

“Sorry, Seras, that’s just the way it is,” I said.

It’s fine—she knows what’s happening here. I’m fighting him. This is just what I have to do.

None of the other Elite Five questioned Civit’s decision.

“Schweitz.”

“Yes?”

“Inform Grim Ritter before the day is out that these two are not to be touched—he’s probably off wasting his time in some nearby village.”

“Understood.”

“Ever since they started calling him the Heroic Blood Slayer, he hasn’t listened to a word you say, has he?”

“I’m afraid not,” Schweitz replied. “My son is rather eccentric, even by the standards of the Black Dragon Knights. I believe he’ll be much more useful if we allow him more freedom.”

“So it would seem.”

Civit’s white dragon spread its great wings wide.

“Hah! And so the curtain closes on the conclusion of the first act. What a cliffhanger for the second! I cannot wait.”

“Until we meet again, Too-ka Mimori. I look forward to it.”

The Elite Five spurred the dragons to flight, preparing to leave.

I did it.

I was still sweating profusely.

Seras is still alive. I’m still alive.

We convinced the Strongest Man in the World to let us go.

My gamble paid off.

“Para—”

“Too-ka—”

“—lyze!”

“—Curse y—!”

Civit didn't withdraw from an approaching threat. I'd walked slowly toward him during our conversation, but he never backed down. He also hadn't stopped me. That's why...

I'm in range.

"I'd expect nothing less, Strongest Man in the World."

I struck at the moment he turned his dragon around to leave, the moment when his guard would be the weakest. Even then, Civit reacted to my aggression with terrifying speed. But it was too late. I was faster—just a moment ahead of him.

He and the Soul Eater are complete opposites—that monster was deceived by fear, and it let me hide my true intentions behind it. With Civit, I hid behind bravery, a willingness to engage him head on and go along with his theatrics. There won't be a second act for you, Civit Gartland.

Show's over.

"Until we meet again...' Sorry, but I don't plan on dragging this out that long."

Everything hinged on that one moment...that instant when they were sure they were closing the curtain on me, when their guards were down for just a second. It's the only time I could've struck. I had to do something—it'd be too risky to let them go.

"Sorry, Civit Gartland. This is no fairy tale."

Not even close. I don't have time for fated battles between promised foes. All I want is revenge. You and your Black Dragon Knights are a complication that need to be removed.

No second act for you.

The paralyzed Black Dragon Knights dropped before my outstretched right hand, crashing into the dirt one by one.

"I'll be bringing our destined battle to a close sooner than you expected. This ends here, Black Dragon Knights."



Chapter 5: Inheritance

THE ELITE FIVE CRASHED into the ground, their dragons screaming and spitting blood and gore as they fell, clearly still trying to move their outstretched, paralyzed wings.

“Figures the strongest dragons in the world would put up a fight.”

The dragons had been glaring at me the whole time I talked to Civit, murder in their eyes, drool dripping from their mouths.

“You must’ve really wanted to kill me, huh? Sorry about your luck.” I turned my attention to more important things. “Piggymaru, get ready,” I ordered.

“Squee!”

Seras looked dumbfounded. I turned to get her attention but was interrupted.

“Wh... What d-did yo—?! Too...kaa?!” Civit called out to me from where he lay, struggling against invisible bonds.

Still not in range for Sleep —no point in risking walking any closer.

“I already told you—I’m on a different level.”

I held out my arm toward him.

“Poison.”

I can’t take any chances with the Elite Five—lethal mode on. Certain death.

“Nh?! Gah! Aagh!” Schweitz and Orban began to moan in agony.

“Ahh?! Th-this can’t be... A p-paralysis s-status effect?! Imposs...ible! T-to hit all of us...at once?! Ghhaaa?!”

Blood seeped through the bandaged knight’s coverings, dyeing him a deep red.

“Gh, Nhh?! ”

He must’ve tried to move.

All of them lay on the ground before me. *Who knows how long it’ll take for them to die, though. Probably the safest thing to do is put them to sleep once they’re a little weaker.*

“Too...kaa...!”

I heard a hollow *thunk*, a spear being driven into the ground.

“...You really are the Strongest Man in the World, huh?”

Civit was standing up.

The other three seem like they've given up already—they're not even moving. Not Civit, though.

He was wet with blood from forcing himself off the ground. His whole body was trembling, and he clung to his spear to stay upright.

“Gh... Bh...”

Blood leaked out of his eyes, poured from his mouth and dripped to the dirt below. The Soul Eater had tried to move and failed—Civit had broken through that barrier. He hoisted his spear into the air.

Spurt!

Blood flowed freely from his arm, but despite that, he pulled back, preparing to launch the spear.

This is bad. If I'd approached him to make him sleep, I might already be skewered by now. Do I move closer to get in range? I won't have enough time to use Piggymaru...

Seras interrupted my thoughts, stepping between Civit and I.

“Seras?”

“If he throws that thing, I might be able to deflect it. Let me be your shield.”

“Are you sure? You...can handle it after all that?”

“I'm your bodyguard, Sir Too-ka,” she said.

“Thanks.”

“Ha. It's too soon to thank me—save it for when—”

Spurt!

“Gh...?!”

Civit was bleeding harder.

“Gh, Ha... Ah—?!”

He dropped to his knees, frozen, never letting go of the spear in his hands. The pool of blood forming around him soaked the ground.

“I've never seen anybody move so much after being poisoned and paralyzed.”

He really is that strong... I sighed admiringly.

“I never could've beaten him under normal cir-cumstances.”

It was a good idea to prioritize paralyzing them, no matter what.

Rustle rustle...

I felt Piggymaru's tentacles on the back of my neck and temples.

I can't let my guard down. I have to stay on alert until they're all dead. This isn't over yet.

"Ghh... Gh— Gah—"

The bandaged knight was the first to die, wounded by his futile struggles.

"What's happening to him?" asked Seras. The man's body began to glow, then sent a flare of light shooting up into the sky.

"It might be a signal," I suggested.

Something to show the others where he died, maybe. Was there some kind of light-emitting magic under those bandages that activated automatically when his heart stopped?

I was reminded of the egg I found in the ruins—how it glowed when I unwrapped it.

Was that supposed to bring Civit running to his rescue? To summon him if someone managed to defeat the Elite Five?

"Only thing that light's going to bring our way is—"

Dragon cries rang out in the distance.

He must've left some of his knights out there on standby—likely to prevent them from interfering with his dramatics.

They flew toward the light like moths to a flame.

"Sir Too-ka, what should we do? I recommend we make our escape through the forest..."

Rustle, rustle...

I don't want to leave. What if they have healing spells that can save Civit before he dies?

"I need to stay here and see this through to the end," I said.

It's still too dangerous to approach Civit directly. There's nothing more terrifying than a man with nothing to lose. I remember what I was like in the Ruins of Disposal—truly cornered and unbelievably powerful. If Seras could use her spirit armor, I might've asked her to finish them all off, but...

"Seras, I want you to run. I'm sorry I couldn't explain what was happening earlier, but—"

"I'm staying," said Seras, firmly. "I'm keeping the blue dragonstone, of course," she added, laughing slightly.

She's tougher than I gave her credit for—brave, too.

“All right, then.”

The black dragons approached, stopping in midair to call down to the Elite Five.

“Sir Schweitz?! Wh-what’s happening down there?”

They're still out of range. They aren't coming any closer, either.

Schweitz was completely paralyzed, unable to even speak.

“Azu...ran...!”

It was Civit. The Black Dragon Knights above looked confused.

“What?! C-Commander Civit...?! Y-you... You're injured?!”

Apparently his subordinates can't even believe he'd be injured in battle.

Civit screamed up at them, blood pouring from his mouth.

“Ghh... Sdaay... K-kill them from th-the air! Sdday away! Kill them f-from a distance—!”

He can't move, but he can still scream, huh?

“N-no matter wha—! Kill them!”

His death drew ever closer as he struggled. *He probably won't last until the Paralyze gauge runs out.*

Rustle...

Piggymaru gave me a signal. I felt his tentacles winding around my torso.

All right—we're connected now.

There are two main problems with this ability: how long it takes to get it going, and how fast it burns through mana. Back when I was training with Piggymaru, my mana plummeted when we tried this—and I couldn't risk passing out during the conversation with Civit. Tentacles stretching up toward my face would have made him way more suspicious of me, too.

This ability's only good for short bursts of fighting.

“Sir Too-ka, what’s happening to you?”

“Don't worry. I'm borrowing some of Piggymaru's power, that's all.”

The black dragons circled in the sky above us.

“Hmph... They look restless.”

The knights were desperately trying to assess the situation, confused by the Elite Five lying on the ground below them.

Figures. They never expected to see Civit Gartland kneeling in a pool of his own blood—not even in their worst nightmares.

“Wh-hat a-are y-you doing? H-hurry u-up an’ kill them!”

He was too weak to scream now, and his wavering voice couldn’t reach the dragons overhead. *Struggled too hard against paralysis—I don’t think he’s ever moving again.*

“Let’s do this, Piggymaru.”

“Squee!”

“Seras.”

“Y-yes?”

“If they start throwing projectiles, I need you to intercept them. If you can, keep an eye on the Elite Five, too.”

Seras looked up at the sky and raised her sword.

“Leave it to me!”

Countless tentacles shot out from until my robes. To anybody watching from above, it must’ve looked like I’d grown wings.

I looked up at the Black Dragon Knights.

“Right.”

Release mana.

“Time to crush them.”

Assault Accel.

The sky glowed orange, and the setting sun lit the cirrocumulus clouds and sent long rays of sunlight streaming through the trees into the deep forest below. The golden beams found their way through the leaves, illuminating the dirt at my feet.

The circling Black Dragon Knights above moved into battle positions, weapons in their outstretched hands, but they didn’t attack. Maybe they thought the Elite Five were being held hostage.

They’re reluctant to face whoever just bested the Strongest Man in the World. That’s the weak point of most groups—take down the boss, and the rest will scatter.

“Status Open.”

I was afraid of that—my MP’s dropping fast. I can’t keep this up for long.

“Let’s get this over with quick, Piggymaru.”

“Squee!”

I poured my mana into Piggymaru’s tentacles, making them glow fluorescent in the fading sunlight.

“Sque—queeeeeeeeeee—!”

With a great whoosh, the tentacles shot up into the air.

“Wh-what are those things?!”

They looked like arrows arching through the sunset sky toward the Black Dragon Knights.

“Don’t lose your heads! Strike them down!”

None of the knights’ blows landed.

“Wh-?! They’ve stopped...?!”

Yeah. They aren’t coming for you—not the way you think, at least.

The knights looked confused—why had the tentacles stopped almost ten meters away from them?

In range.

I stretched out my hand toward the sky.

“Paralyze.”

It reached them.

“Wha—?!”

“My dragon!”

“I-I... I can’t m-move?!”

Piggymaru was halfway part of me now. Anything in its range was in my range, too.

“Kh! That freakish tentacle creature did this?! Y-you monster!”

I’m not used to controlling this yet. One of them wasn’t fully in range—I didn’t position myself properly.

I split one of my tentacles in two and went for him.

“Piggymaru, are you okay?”

“Squee! ♪”

Green.

Piggymaru seems totally fine, though I guess that makes sense—it’s not taking any damage.

The Great Sage left some notes about this—I think the only way Piggymaru can be damaged is if something injures his core? So it shouldn’t hurt if these tentacles get injured—or it shouldn’t hurt much, at least. And

since we're connected right now, I wouldn't be surprised if hurting the tentacles hurts me.

"Maybe we should be a little more aggressive."

"Squee!"

"But you let me know if it hurts, okay?"

"Squee!"

I threaded tentacles up through the clouds, searching for new targets, as the paralyzed dragon knights came crashing to the ground around me.

Oh, I could just...

"Sleep."

The remaining dragons stopped in midair, falling to the forest floor with their riders in tow—a rain of black beasts pummeling the ground in eerie silence.

"Right, then."

I quickly applied Poison to the mass of dragons and Black Dragon Knights that lay sprawled around me.

"Gh, Ahh..."

Orban.

"I—impo...possible..."

Schweitz.

"Too-kaa!"

Civit.

I applied a second round of status effects to the Elite Five.

"Sleep."

All that's left is to wait, watch, and keep reapplying these effects like I always do.

Level up!

Level 2 → Level 3

All right! Sleep is finally at level 3 too, and...hmm?

New skills unlocked

Freeze

Dark

Berserk

New skills, huh? I'll check them out later—gotta deal with these Black Dragon Knights first. I'll stick with the combo that I know works.

“No, wait... It might be worth trying them out.”

They might be useful, and who knows when I'll have another chance to test them against real opponents.

“Seras.”

“Y-yes?”

“If Orban attacks me, put him down.”

“U-understood.”

Seras didn't ask any questions—I appreciated that. I directed my tentacles toward the still-breathing Orban, who had a little time left on his paralysis gauge.

“Berserk!”

His whole body began to twitch and shake uncontrollably.

“Gh... Ghh... Aggh...!”

He screamed over and over, coarse and filled with rage. He began to spit blood.

Just as expected. I guess this skill makes targets aggressive. Combo this with Paralyze, and targets are forced to move and struggle against their paralysis, killing them faster.

Next, I turned my tentacles on Schweitz.

There's less risk doing this with my tentacles than approaching directly.

I removed Schweitz's Sleep effect and paralyzed him again.

I'm probably going to need him to be awake for this to work.

“Dark.”

Schweitz opened his eyes.

“Huh...?! Wh... I can't see! M-my... My eyes...”

I guess this one affects the enemy's vision—I should've seen that coming. Might be useful when I don't want to be seen, or even for close combat.

“Gh... Hgh... Gah—ah—ah...!”

“Nhh...?!”

Both of the dragon knights writhed in agony from the poison.

Orban tried to kill Seras for the money—Schweitz tried to give her to his subordinates as a plaything. There's nothing wrong with using them for my experiments. They're worthless—just like I am. I have a good idea what this freeze skill does, but...

“Hm?”

I checked my MP gauge—a substantial amount was already gone.

I can't let this reach zero.

I looked over at Seras, who was watching over the Black Dragon Knights scattered around us.

Guess I'm the only one who can see the stat screen.

“Piggymaru, deactivate.”

“Squee!”

I felt Piggymaru's tentacles detach from my torso.

I'll test out the last skill some other time...I don't want to risk overwriting some of my other skills. Freeze sounds similar enough to Paralyze that it might. Right now, all these targets are paralyzed and poisoned—I want to make absolutely sure they die.

Somewhere off beyond the trees, the death cries began. First it was one of the Elite Five's dragons...eventually Civit's white dragon died, too.

“Gyh... Eh...”

Level up!

Level 1789 → Level 1796

The dragon mount of the Strongest Man in the World... It really lives up to the name with that many experience points. I bet if humans gave EXP, Civit would have given me a ton...

My MP gauge was now completely refilled.

No need to worry about that anymore.

The dragon knights continued to die around us, most of them still asleep.

“A dreamless sleep,” I said.

“This is such terrifying power. I was surprised to see you take down Civit, but this new technique with Sir Piggymaru is incredible.”

I looked over at Seras—she still seemed a little shaken. I wanted to talk with her about what happened during the battle, why I couldn't just leave like I told Civit, and why I had to see this through to the end.

"It takes a long time for that technique to activate, and it's really taxing on me. It has a lot of constraints."

I'm not happy about being an E-class, but I'm so glad I have the perfect stats to be a magic user.

"That ability with Piggymaru...is that one of your powers as a hero from another world?" she asked hesitantly.

I guess she's still worried about asking personal questions. Can't say she doesn't keep her word.

"Hero from another world, huh...I guess you could say that."

The monster enhancement solution came from my copy of Forbidden Arts: The Complete Works, written by the Great Sage Anglin, Hero of Darkness.

Seras looked at the Elite Five.

"I knew you were strong, but I never expected you to be a hero from another world. I thought that your power might be some cursed magic, or... And, well, I didn't know that the Goddess of Alion was searching for—"

"Don't worry about it. She doesn't like me either."

"I-is that so?"

"She disposed of me—thought I was worthless, I guess. She thinks I'm dead."

I smiled, trying to reassure her.

"So don't worry, okay? I won't sell you out to that foul Goddess."

"F-foul Goddess...?"

"What else should I call her?"

Seras responded with a dry laugh.

"To think you're so strong, but she disposed of you anyway. You must have really gotten on her bad side. But that incredible power...I think I understand now," she said.

"I don't want anybody to know I'm a hero, so I figured it'd be best to keep quiet about it. We're going to go our separate ways someday, right? Some things are better left unsaid."

Seras shook her head.

"I wasn't of any help when the Elite Five attacked. You defeated them all on your own."

"You did your duty as my bodyguard."

Seras smiled sadly, then looked away and stared off into the distance. I gave her a pat on the shoulder.

"You all right?"

"Ah, I apologize. My head is spinning with all that has occurred. I still need some time to think."

"I bet—thanks for focusing on the job earlier."

"I couldn't let you die."

"What?"

"I couldn't forgive myself if I spaced out and let you die. It was self-defense, in a way. My heart couldn't take watching you die; I had to protect you—protect it. That's why. You saved my life once, after all. I couldn't live with myself if I let you down."

I had a feeling that's what it was. Seras really is just like my foster mother. Even when she feels down...

"You have a really strong heart, don't you?"

"Sometimes you smile kindly, you know, Sir Too-ka."

"Maybe because I'm thinking of someone kind."

"Your foster mother?"

I laughed at Seras.

"She's just like you—speaking of kind people."

"But the expression you make when you think of her...it's a little different."

"Well, I mean, you're a different sort of person."

Seras is a high elf, not a human.

Seras's eyes softened at the words.

"Uh, ghh..." One of the knights moaned, interrupting the conversation.

Orban breathed his last, and Schweitz quickly followed. Almost all the dragon knights were dead now.

It's quiet, death by poison. And slow. How many people could do this and see it through, I wonder? How many would have a change of heart, get scared and dispel the effect?

I'm sure some would start to feel compassion for the tortured faces

before them. No decent man could do this. I sit and wait for countless people to die, watching them, holding their lives in my hands. I need to chase away that compassion—that mercy. Steel myself and not look away from the darkness.

I walked around applying paralysis to the dragon knights who remained, just in case. Above the living, a gauge displaying my status effects appeared; above the dead, there was nothing. Before long, only one gauge remained.

“To-o-ka...”

I sighed with admiration—his Sleep gauge still had time remaining.

“Still conscious, even with that Sleep effect weighing you down...just how strong are you, Civit Gartland?”

There was no indication that he could move most of his body, though—he wouldn’t be getting up again. Even so, he radiated his desire to kill me, coming in waves as he drifted in and out of consciousness. I stood back and watched him.

All that extra damage from moving during paralysis, plus the poison damage itself... He’s weak. He’s powerless now.

Seras rushed to stand between us. Civit clawed at the ground with his armored fist.

Is he trying to say something?

He stared up at me with half-closed eyes.

“Wh... Wh-what...a-are...you...?”

I’d already given him my name—I knew Civit was asking something different.

“I’m a hero from another world, that much is true, but I’m not your typical ‘save the world’ kinda hero.”

I stepped around Seras to look down at him.

“I’m just out for revenge.”

And just like that, I sent the Strongest Man in the World to an early grave under the blackening sky, beneath the trees of the Dark Forest.



HALF A DAY'S RIDE BY HORSE and carriage north from Eno, the capital of Alion, stood a tall mountain range. It was rumored that legendary creatures known as blue dragons once lived in the ruins there. But now these Ancient Dragon Ruins stood empty, and the blue dragons had passed into myth. It was here that class 2-C found themselves.

“Hah!”

Sogou Ayaka's spear pierced the monster's heart. It spat blood and began to spasm violently, then suddenly fell still. She swiftly pulled back her spear, panting.

“Is everyone okay?” she asked the students behind her. They were the seven “dropouts” she'd been tasked with leading, the ones who hadn't passed the Goddess's initiation ceremony—five girls, two boys.

“Y-yeah...”

“You're amazing, Sogou-san.”

The weapons in their hands were still clean and unblooded, and their armor shone like new. The only equipment that showed any signs of use were their shields.

“Focus on protecting yourselves, okay? Don't worry about killing monsters yet.”

One of the girls was sobbing, cowering away from the dead monster.

“I'm sorry, Ayaka-chan. My legs are shaking, I... I can't move...”

Ayaka smiled and gently stroked the trembling girl's face.

“It's okay, Minamino-san. I'm sorry I had to bring you here.”

Minamino Moe shook her head.

“No,” she sobbed. “We should be thanking you. She wanted to dispose of us, and you saved us. You asked her to spare us! She told us everything.”

I should've known she'd tell them. I wonder what she thought she'd get out of it. Why is she like this? We should be on the same side.

“We'll do our best, so—*sob*—we won't be a burden to you, Ayaka-chan...” the girl sobbed.

“It's going to be okay. I'll protect you from the monsters.”

I don't want any more of my classmates to die. I couldn't save Mimori Touka, but I can protect these ones. As an S-class hero, I might even have the power to take down that Demon King if I really put my mind to it.

She gripped her spear tightly.

I'll defeat him, then we can all go home, and...and I won't let anybody else die. I'll protect these seven with all my strength—they're going to make it out alive. Kashima-san, too.

I'm going to defeat the Demon King.

"Suou-san," Ayaka called out to one of the girls. Suou wore glasses and had a bob haircut. "If I can't get to you all fast enough, can you try and slow the monsters down? Just buy everybody whatever time you can to get to safety."

"Yes," said Suou Kayako in a monotone.

Hers was the only sword with any blood on it—she'd responded when Ayaka pinned a monster with her spear and asked if anybody wanted to deal the killing blow to level up. Only Kayako raised her hand to volunteer. In the old world, she'd seemed rather dark—Ayaka didn't often see her talking with the others. Much like Kashima Kobato, she blended into the background—just for different reasons.

She's surprisingly brave. It's almost strange that she fell into this group of dropouts.

The rest of them kept apologizing.

"I'm sorry I can't be of more use, Sogou-san."

"I'm supposed to be the man here, but...I'm useless."

"I'm so, so scared..."

"I can't kill a living thing, I just can't."

"Don't apologize." She smiled reassuringly. "Everybody's different, and we all have our own way of thinking. Nobody's good at everything."

I can't assume they'll ever be able to become like me—we all have our strengths and weaknesses. I just need to do whatever I can for them.

"I heard there's some kind of magic in this world that can give you power for fighting. I think you might all be able to use that skill someday, too! There are magical item things, too, so don't feel like you have to fight. Just protect yourselves for now, and if you feel up to it, try to support me. Um, so...don't feel bad, okay?"

She raised her fist in the air.

“Let’s defeat the Demon King and get home!”

Everybody except Kayako had hopeful looks in their eyes.

“Sogou-san...”

“I’m so glad I’m with you...”

“W-we’ll do whatever we can to help!”

“Thank you, Sogou-san!”

They’re all such kind, good people. I have to protect them.

The Goddess had given them a task—find a meat dragon and bring back its eye.

“Okay,” Akaya said, “we’ve just got to find that monster, right?”

They set off through the caves, finding their way with a map the Goddess had given them. Eventually they came to a wide, cavernous area. Kayako held up her lantern to light the way.

“Thank you, Suou-san.”

According to the map, they should live right around here...

“My, my, if it isn’t Ayaka.”

A group of students came trudging in from another direction, the boy in front calling out to her as he approached.

“Yasu-kun.”

He had changed.

No...maybe he’s always been like this.

“Must be hard for you, huh?”

“What?”

“No need to play dumb with me. I see those hangers-on you have with you, clinging to your feet to keep from falling.” He patted her on the shoulder. “Must be tiring. It’s tough being one of the powerful.”

Yasu gestured to the group of disinterested-looking students trailing behind him.

“I don’t consider my friends ‘hangers-on,’” Ayaka replied.

“Just the kind of answer I expected,” Yasu said with a shrug. “The *right* answer—sensible. Amazing, really. You’re beaming, Ayaka, bright as the sun. Nothing like those idiots behind you. How about it, you want to team up with me?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I don’t think we would work well together.”

“Ugh. They’re just using you. You’re so talented, but this...it’s such a waste. Pfah ha ha...”

I hoped our groups might work together, but...that doesn’t seem possible.

“Do you know what the Goddess calls heroes B-class and under?” Yasu said, throwing his arms out wide to indicate his classmates behind him. “She calls them *faints*! You know why, right? Because they’re freakin’ background characters! Practically invisible! They’re *useless*. They’re nothing!”

“That’s not true. They’re all people, with names and personalities. They’re your classmates, and—”

At that moment, several monsters came jumping out at them from the shadows.

“Ghaaaa—!”

They all had golden eyes.

“Everybody get back!” Ayaka positioned herself in front of the others and gripped her spear. Yasu’s group began to scream.

“Y-Yasu-san!”

“Please!”

“Use your A-class power to save us!”

Yasu’s eyes opened wide, filled with bloodlust. He twisted his mouth into a maniacal smile.

“My life! Burn these foes to dust! *Lævateinn*!”

Flames danced in Yasu’s eyes as fire burst from his hands, racing toward the monsters like beasts freed from their chains. The flames devoured the monsters, which let out cries of pain and died in seconds.

Is that Yasu-kun’s unique skill...?

Yasu’s group began to shower him with praise.

“Y-you’re awesome! I knew you could do it, Yasu-san!”

“Amazing! Incredible!”

“Those flames are stronger than anything the other heroes can do, I just know it!”

“I’ll follow you anywhere!”

Their faces were emotionless as they spoke. *Just flattery—nothing more.*

Yasu laughed to himself, looking down at his hands.

“Oh my... I didn’t intend to show you that just yet.”

Ayaka’s group split off from Yasu’s and continued through the ruins.

He thinks anybody below him is worthless. He’s changing. We all are.

Soon they came into an area slick with blood, monster corpses strewn around haphazardly. They were a little off the beaten path now—they’d heard a commotion and came to investigate.

Did Kirihara’s group do this?

It was then that Ayaka saw two girls in the shadows—the Takao sisters. The younger, Itsuki, was on her knees with the older, Hijiri, rubbing her back. It was clear that Itsuki had just been sick.

“Are you all right?” asked Hijiri.

“Sorry, Aneki, it’s just...seeing all the corpses, I really don’t feel so good...”

“It’s fine. You’re a product of the modern Japanese society in which you were raised, after all. Your reaction to such stimuli is entirely expected.”

“How do you do it, Aneki?”

“I have simply shut down the creative part of my brain to resolve the issue. All mental problems are made up of illusions created by our imaginations, after all.”

“It’s hard for me. I don’t get what you’re saying at all, but, like... you’re amazing, Aneki.”

“That said, I cannot shut out the smell of these corpses. I must simply recategorize the smell of death as a biological phenomenon—the smell of bacteria and microbes doing their work on the bodies. In a way, it’s hardly the smell of death at all.”

“Sorry, I really don’t get it.”

“That’s quite all right.”

A third of the monsters around them were burned to a crisp—the rest seemed like they’d each been entirely split in two by a single clean blow.

Did they do this with their abilities? That means...I’m the only S-class who hasn’t gotten their unique skill yet.

Ayaka had leveled up, of course, but hadn’t unlocked her unique skill.

“We’ve got our meat dragon eye—I believe we’ve completed our

mission here,” said Hijiri, lifting a small sack off the ground.

The Goddess told us we'd need one eye between five of us... We're a party of eight, meaning we have to find at least two.

“Incidentally—you can come over and talk to us, you know, Sogou-san?” Hijiri said without turning her head. “We don’t bite.”

Ayaka walked out of the shadows.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want to intrude. We heard monster screams, so we came to investigate.”

Hijiri looked at the students milling around behind Ayaka.

“It seems you’ve made some friends.”

The two sisters walked over and stopped when they reached Ayaka.

“Are you all right?” Hijiri asked.

“M-me?”

“Yes.”

Ayaka smiled nervously. She never would have expected Takao Hijiri to be worried about her.

“I-I’m doing the best I can.”

“You don’t seem so good.”

“Huh?”

“You won’t look me in the eye.”

“Oh...”

“You should learn to take better care of yourself, you know,” said Hijiri as she walked away. Itsuki hesitated a moment, still looking a little sick as she patted Ayaka on the shoulder.

“Like...don’t be so hard on yourself, class rep.”

“Th-thanks.”

“Aneki actually likes you, y’know. I can tell.”

“What?”

“Come, Itsuki,” called Hijiri. Itsuki went running after her.

“Hijiri-san, do you really...?” Ayaka called after her.

“I hardly see any reason to deny it.”

With that, the Takao sisters rushed off into the darkness once more. Ayaka’s group followed, doubling back in the direction they had come, but saw no more signs of them.

“There’s an area where the meat dragons *definitely* live just up ahead...” said Ayaka, putting away her map. Thanks to the corpses those sisters left behind, she’d gotten a look at the real thing.

Bigger than I expected, but with the reach on my spear, I should be able to keep one at bay...

After walking a little longer, they came out into the main area of the cave. This was where the Goddess had promised they could find their bounty.

“Wh-what is this place...?” one of Ayaka’s group said with a quavering voice.

The cavern looked like a slaughterhouse—more gruesome corpses lay strewn throughout than even the Takao Sisters had managed to kill.

“Can’t eat this freakin’ lizard meat, can we?! I’m getting hungry, man!”

It was Oyamada Shougo, emerging from one of the cavern’s many exits, covered from head to toe in blood that pretty clearly wasn’t his own.

“Shougo, you’re so badass! ♪”

“Like a bloodthirsty barbarian, yeah!”

“I bet you’re, like, even eviler than the Demon King already!”

Kirihara’s group. Ayaka couldn’t say she was surprised.

“Shut up! I’m an A-class, so don’t talk to me like that, y’hear?! You want a bullet in your back or what?!” he shouted at the girls.

“So scary~! ♪ You’re a total villain!”

“How ’bout I kill the Demon King and take his place?! Oh man, that’s a great idea!”

He wiped the blood off his greatsword and kicked a monster corpse, sending it across the cavern floor.

“I’m, like, not leveling up so much anymore! Where’s the challenge, seriously?! You feel me, Ayaka?!”

He suddenly turned toward her.

“What’s the point in us elites being here, killing small-fry monsters and babysitting these *faints*?! Why’re you dragging all those weakling warriors around anyway, Sogou-senpai?! You got stuck with all the ones that didn’t work out? That’s freakin’ hilarious~!”

“Y—!” Ayaka started to reply but thought better of it.

He’s trying to get a rise out of me—I can’t give him what he wants.

“Let’s go, everyone.”

She ignored Oyamada and led them through the cavern, wary that he might jump them at any time.

I wouldn’t be entirely surprised if he attacked us with his weapon. I have to be ready for anything.

“Pgyeeeeeh—! Ghe! Gheeh!”

Ayaka trembled at the sound of the monster’s screams.

No...it’s not just that. Something’s being dragged this way...

The sound of footsteps echoed through the ruins. Whatever it was, it was coming from the opposite side of the cavern.

“Ah—”

It was Kirihara Takuto, holding his bloody katana in one hand and dragging a wailing monster by the other.

“Uh?!”

Moe put both hands over her mouth in shock—even Kirihara’s group looked taken aback. Only Oyamada was laughing. All the golden-eyed monster’s limbs had been cut clean off, but what was left of it writhed and struggled as Kirihara dragged it into the cavern.

“Cry for me,” he said quietly. “Scream.”

He thrust his katana into the monster’s wounds and it started wailing again.

“Call them here.” The screams echoed through the ruins. “All of them.”

It was a terrifying spectacle to behold.

“T-Takuto?” The girls in Kirihara’s group looked repulsed by what he was doing.

“Aren’t you, like, g-going a bit far?”

“Yeah, totally.”

“She’s right! I’m kinda, like, turned off right now—”

“What does it matter?” he replied coldly.

“Huh? I mean...”

“What does it matter if I treat the monsters like this? Who cares?”

“Well, I just... I mean, I guess I don’t, but...”

The girls looked at Oyamada for help, clearly unsettled by what was happening. The monster continued to struggle, screaming and

thrashing violently on the ground.

“Hey, Takuto!”

“What is it, Shougo?”

“You... You’re just too freakin’ smart, man!”

“Flattery will get you nowhere.”

“But, like, look around.”

“What?”

“For real, though. Do you see any monsters comin’ our way?”

He’s right. The only sound in the cavern was the wailing of the monster at Kirihara’s feet, its echoes reverberating through the chamber.

“Ugh... Worthless.”

He held his blade to the creature’s neck.

“Gh... Ghe...?!”

“All of them. *Worthless.*”

He slit the monster’s throat, sending blood spurting out onto the ground.

“I’ve gotten too strong, it seems.” He blankly wiped the blood off his katana. “I’m tired of fighting weaklings.”

Ayaka’s group successfully found their meat dragon eyes and exited the ruins. They found their way to a square within the high walls of the ruins where they’d been instructed to gather after completing their mission. All the people they’d met in the ruins, plus Ikusaba Asagi’s group, were already milling around. Ayaka spotted Kobato among them.

Our group was the last to return. I’m just thankful no one got hurt.

2-C assembled themselves under the cloudless sky—all except their homeroom teacher Zakurogi Tamotsu, still-recovering Sakura Asami, and poor, dead Mimori Touka.

“Huh? Who the heck is that?” said Oyamada, hopping down from the fence he was sitting on. Every head turned to see the woman walking toward them.

“Cat ears...?”

No, she has human ears, too...those aren’t real cat ears.

The woman was slender and stalked elegantly across the square. Her hair was pale purple, and her gray eyes flashed like a cat’s. Her

clothes were *incredible*.

They must increase the flow of mana, too...I can't even imagine wearing something that revealing, though.

Two shortswords swung at her waist, but the most attention-grabbing part of her was her tail—it appeared to be made of swords, snaking and swaying behind her as she walked.

It looks like a snake sword, blades attached together with links of chain...

“Who the heck are you?” said Oyamada, standing before her. Kiri-hara looked on disinterestedly. Yasu was sitting, legs crossed, watching quietly from afar; the Takao sisters kept their distance, too.

“Who’s that hot cosplay chick over there?” Asagi asked Kobato, who was standing next to her. “I thought the Goddess was coming to get us.”

Kobato looked like she didn’t know how to respond. The cat-eared woman looked around at the class, her eyes landing briefly on each of them before returning to Oyamada.

“I’m here as a representative of the Goddess Vicius. From now on, I will be handling you when the Goddess cannot come and meet you personally. Today, I’m here simply to introduce myself and guide you safely home,” she said. Though she seemed to feel she was above the whole situation, her voice sounded surprisingly young and childish.

“Some lil’ stick girl is gonna *handle* us?” said Oyamada, making a face at her. “You stronger than us or what? Kiri-hara’s group ain’t following no weakling, got it?”

“Would you like a demonstration?”

“Oh? Come on, then,” said Oyamada.

“Let’s see... If you can land a single hit on me without being knocked on your back, I’ll become your ever-obedient slave for eternity.”

“There it is! Some conceited line about how you could never lose to me? Bring it on! I can’t wait to see the look on your face when I crush you!”

Kiri-hara looked on, pity in his eyes. “Sounds like your bark is worse than your bite, Shougo,” he said.

“Shut up! I love being a freakin’ underdog, coming from behind and makin’ girls like this beg me to stop!”

“You must be Oyamada-san. A foul mouth indeed,” said the

woman.

“Huh~? What’s your name, freak?!”

“I am one of the Disciples of Vicius, Nyantan Kikipat.”

“Ha... Huh?! Ny-Nyanta— Pfft!”

Oyamada burst out laughing.

“Ha ha ha ha ha! *Nyantan*?! Seriously?! Just how bad do you wanna be a cat, girl?! Th-this ain’t fair, Nyantan, how’m I supposed to compete with these hilarious attacks?! Ha hah—!”

The woman looked bored.

“Pffh! Oh man, does this chick have no sense of humor or what~?! Haah, what an idiot! Ha ha ha ha ha! I can’t win! She’s a god! That’s so freakin’ funny! All right, soon as you’re my slave, we’re workin’ on our comedy routines, okay?”

“Here I come.”

Clink.

Three blades shot from the tips of her fingers on each hand, swords like sharp claws. Oyamada drew his greatsword.

“Oh?! Ready to go, are we? Let’s do this! I’ll try not to hurt you too bad, *Nyantan*. ♪”

Several minutes later, Oyamada was on his back.

“Uh...?! You... You’re like...super strong...! Augh...c’mon...!”

His greatsword was far out of his reach now—he knelt on the ground, completely out of breath. Nyantan, on the other hand, hadn’t broken a sweat. She seemed completely unfazed, her cat tail swaying gently behind her. Kirihara was looking at her rather differently now too—mumbling something to himself. Ayaka took a deep breath.

I can’t believe it. That speed...that technique! How long must she have trained?

Nyantan’s movements had been smooth and practiced—perfect almost to a fault. She looked on with much the same expression she had before the fight—unsmiling, emotionless.

“Perhaps this has served as our greeting. Let us return to the capital, and I’ll inform you of what the Goddess has planned for you,” she said dryly. “You’re moving on to the next stage.”

BEFORE NYANTAN KIKIPAT was sent to the Ancient Dragon Ruins to greet the heroes, she was called to meet with the Goddess Vicius in her chambers.

The Goddess sat in her room, tossed a piece of paper she had just finished reading onto her desk, and sighed.

“The Demon King’s armies are on the move, it seems. We may be called to battle much sooner than I expected. I was right to call on you, Nyantan,” said the Goddess, smiling widely.

“What would you have me do, Goddess?”

“I will be so busy taking care of this Demon King business that I fear I will need to send you out on my behalf.”

“How may I serve you?”

“I wish for you to watch over the heroes for me. Be their guardian, so to speak.”

“Why me?”

“You’re strong, wise, and...well, frankly, Ulza is the country I care about the least in all the world. It was wasteful of me to send you there in the first place.”

“Understood.”

“Most important of all, you have proven yourself loyal.” The Goddess deftly slipped off her shoes, exposing her bare feet, and looked down at her guest. “Isn’t that right, Nyantan?”

Nyantán knelt and crawled toward the Goddess’s chair.

“I wish you to demonstrate your loyalty to me, as you always do.”

Lick.

Nyantán’s tongue traced the tips of the Goddess’s toes.

Lick...lick...

“Ooh, thank you ever so much! ♪ Any doubt I had about sending you has been completely *washed away*. ♪”

Nyantán continued lapping at the Goddess’s feet.

“Fret not, I will take *very* good care of your precious little sister. She’s completely safe, I guarantee it. After all, if not even her capable big sister can locate her, she must be entirely hidden away from dangerous, prying eyes!”

Nyantán paused.

“Excuse me, but whatever is the matter? Your tongue has stopped moving. Are you quite well? I’m beginning to doubt your loyalty.”

Lick, lick...

“Wonderful, that’s right. ♪ Mmm, if only those heroes were as faithful as you, Nyantán... Sadly, I simply cannot reach them.”

There was a knock at the door.

“Enter!”

“Goddess, I’m here to report that—oh!” The servant saw Nyantán crouched on the floor and froze. “M-my deepest apologies—”

“Oh no, it’s quite all right—this is a ceremonial act, nothing more. Go on with your report.”

“Ah, well...we’ve heard news that the Elite Five have been spotted in Ulza.”

“Perhaps chasing that Seras Ashrain? I once thought I might find some use for her, but I have lost interest in the girl. She seems ever so stubborn. Of course, I feel bad that her country had to burn, but... *ooh.*”

The Goddess pushed her big toe into Nyantán’s mouth. The licking continued.

“The Elite Five... Whatever shall we do with Civit Gartland? He’s a rather difficult pawn to move—though I suppose he’ll prove useful soon enough, when my heroes are grown. Oh, I have a marvelous idea!” The Goddess clapped her hands together. “Those heroes are quite leveled up by now, are they not? Let us proceed to the next stage!”

The Goddess began rattling off orders to the servant.

“—so, first ask Yonato for a loan of the Four Holy Elders. Oh, and those Sabre-Toothed Tigers, was it? Let’s get them as well. That Dragon Slayer from Ulza—reach out to him, too. Then the Black Dragon Knights, of course... I’m sure *he* will gladly accept the call to help my heroes grow.”

“As you wish,” said the servant, beating a hasty retreat.

The Goddess laughed, smiling up at the ceiling.

“Perhaps the heroes and the Demon King will be meeting much sooner than I expected.”



“**I** HAVE FINISHED CHANGING, Sir Too-ka.”

We were still in the Dark Forest, but had put some distance between ourselves and the battlefield where we fought the Black Dragon Knights.

“Sorry about your other clothes,” I said, turning around to see Seras adjusting her shoes.

“It’s quite all right. I have spares.”

Back on the battlefield, I asked her to rip up her old clothes and soak the rags in blood so we could scatter them about the forest. We created a trail leading off in one direction with Seras’s shoes and bloody clothes, then headed in the other.

“They might see through it right away, but it might buy us some time.”

Our goal is to make it seem like Seras is badly injured, and make them think she couldn’t have gotten far after losing so much blood. No doubt rumors of her injuries will reach the towns and villages nearby. Everybody’s going to be looking for an injured high elf.

“Right, then. Next stop, Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters.”

Seras stopped packing her things to look at me.

“Are you sure about this, Sir Too-ka?”

“I’ve already said I want to bring you with me.”

She’s still worried that she might cause me trouble in the future. People are going to be talking about Civit’s death...will they think Seras did this all on her own? It’d be natural to assume she had help of some kind.

In any case, soon the news will reach the Goddess, and there’s the chance she’ll realize I’m still alive. That Ruins of Disposal scouting party could’ve already told her, for that matter. Eventually, one way or another, she’s going to find out. I have to factor that into my plans—no wishful thinking. Fail to prepare, and you prepare to fail.

A distant howl echoed through the forest. *Hm? A wolf? Must’ve been drawn by the corpses. Might make cause of death less obvious if the bodies are torn up.*

I remembered the way the other mercenaries had reacted to the uninjured bodies I left in my wake in the Mills ruins.

I didn’t have time to disguise the bodies at all, but maybe this time, the wolves will cover my tracks. It’ll reduce the chance that the Goddess

will find out about me. Maybe the Dark Forest really was the perfect stage for our encounter.

I reminded Seras again, firmly, that I had no intention of changing my plans.

“I understand,” she finally relented. “I won’t bring it up again. In return, please, use my life however you see fit.”

Seras laid a hand across her chest, like a knight taking a solemn vow.

“Let us hurry onward,” she said as she finished packing up her clothes. “Four of the Elite Five may be dead, but there is still the Heroic Blood Slayer to contend with. His strength is rumored to rival even Civit’s. He’s bloodthirsty and reckless—a difficult man for even his allies to deal with.”

Seras looked worried.

“Sir Too-ka...is something wrong?”

“The Elite Five’s dragons are bigger than the regular knights’, right?”

“Hm? Oh, yes...”

I searched my memory.

“I think...I’ve already killed him.”

“What?”

“I mentioned that I had some fights on my way to meet you, right? One of them was this weird, super aggressive guy riding a huge dragon. Yeah—about the same size as the ones those four had. His armor looked just like theirs, too.”

I didn’t know his name then—I figured he was just some sub-captain.

“Grim Ritter”—that’s what Civit called him, wasn’t it? Schweitz’s son? Now that I’m thinking about it, I can see the resemblance.

“I’m almost positive that was the Heroic Blood Slayer. We don’t need to worry about the Elite Five anymore.”

I killed them all. They weren’t challenging foes like the Soul Eater—not even the Heroic Blood Slayer stood a chance. Only the Strongest Man in the World even came close. I had to trick him—a cheap shot in order to win.

“You already took down the Heroic Blood Slayer, just like that...?” Seras looked stunned.

“I guess so.”

We set off through the forest, walking in darkness so as not to

draw attention to ourselves. My eyes were used to the dark, and the light from the moon was more than enough to see by. After days and days down in the Ruins of Disposal, the gloom of this forest was nothing to me.

“Squee! ♪ Squee! ♪ Squee~! ♪”

Piggymaru was in a good mood, happy to be reunited with Seras.

“So that Holy Emperor wasn’t the man you thought he was? You can see through lies, though, right? Why didn’t you notice anything was wrong when you were around him back in Neah?”

“I felt he was lying at times, but...the princess lied, too, you see.” Seras’s voice was soft as she reminisced. “The princess told me she might lie to me at times, but...there are kind lies and there are cruel ones. Not all deception has to be evil.”

She’s a smart one, that princess. I suppose Seras gets a true or false reading, but not the specifics. So maybe this princess is really a good person, or maybe she lied to Seras and pretended it was for her own good.

It sounds like whatever that old emperor felt for Seras didn’t read as “evil” or “hate,” exactly. I can’t blame her for not noticing his true colors sooner.

“This is kind of a personal question, but do you want to see this princess again?”

Seras nodded, a little sadly.

“I’m being pursued by the Goddess of Alion, and then there’s all this with the Black Dragon Knights—I would only cause more trouble for her by attempting to reach out.”

“You’re probably right, yeah.”

“I abandoned my country. It’s safer for everybody, especially the princess herself, if I’m seen as a traitorous runaway.”

“Does she know about all this?”

“Yes.”

Seras gently pulled down the neckline of her shirt, showing me the jeweled necklace underneath.

“I received this from her—though I believe officially it’s considered stolen property. The princess instructed me to sell it to fund my journey, but...I could never bring myself to part with it...”

“So that’s why you need money for travel expenses?”

“That’s correct. I know it’s foolish, but...”

Seras was smiling, but her voice sounded like she was going to cry.

“The princess gave me this. I can’t sell it—I just can’t.”

“You must really like her.”

“I do.” She readjusted her shirt to cover the necklace, looking regretful and sad.

It might have been illogical to keep it, but I’m still grateful. It’s the whole reason we met, after all.

“Speaking of travel expenses, did you get the three hundred gold from the Baron?”

“I...did not.”

“Well, I guess we shouldn’t go back for it—no sense in making ourselves easier to follow,” I said. *Hard to imagine the Baron coming after us, knowing we’d just taken down the Black Dragon Knights, though.*

“I agree, though I apologize that I wasn’t able to secure more funds for our journey.”

“No worries—I have more than enough gold and silver here. And hey, look.”

I tossed the pouch of blue dragonstones to Seras.

“What is this?”

“Open it.”

She gasped “D-don’t tell me these are all...b-blue dragonstones?!”

“Guess they are, yeah.”

“Just who in the world *are* you?” she asked in disbelief.

“I told Civit, didn’t I?”

“You said you were out for revenge...I remember.” Her tone was much more serious now. “Is finding this Forbidden Witch part of that goal?”

“Yeah.”

She stopped walking.

“Who are you seeking revenge upon?”

Seras and I aren’t going to be together forever, so I figured there was no point explaining this to her, but...

I stopped in my tracks to look back at her.

“The Goddess Vicius.”

Seras didn't look surprised.

I did call her 'foul Goddess,' didn't I? No point trying to hide it now.

I told my story to Seras—the Ruins of Disposal, my escape, everything.

“Then I came out into the forest, and that's when I met you,” I concluded. Seras had a strange look in her eyes.

“I believed those ruins to be a sealed tomb. I never suspected it was actually an underground ruins system where the Goddess sent heroes to die.”

I guess not many people know them as the Ruins of Disposal...still, thinking of it as a tomb isn't entirely wrong.

“I got the blue dragonstones from the corpses of some heroes there. There was a famous hero who was sent down there, too—the Great Sage Anglin, I think his name was.”

“What? *The* Great Sage Anglin?”

“He must have gotten on the Goddess's bad side.”

“Why did she send you down there, Sir Too-ka? Did you have a disagreement with her...?”

I must've forgotten to mention that part.

“I was the lowest-ranked hero of the bunch.”

“But you're so strong...”

“There's a ritual where they dispose of the worst hero in every group.”

A sacrifice to inspire the others to greatness.

“I have heard that the Kingdom of Alion values tradition quite highly,” Seras said.

Tradition...they must think this worked well in the past, and that's why they keep doing it. Generations of precedent built up by the Goddess manipulating the politics there. Whatever's convenient to her, she calls tradition—whatever isn't, she discards.

“No one has ever emerged alive from those Ruins of Disposal, but you made it out. You even defeated the Black Dragon Knights with your incredible status effect powers.”

“Yeah.”

“The Goddess is blinded by tradition. But that's why she made her biggest mistake—getting rid of you.”

“I'm just glad I got to see her true colors when I did. If she

thought I'd be of any use, she'd probably be manipulating me right now."

"I see. I understand why you want revenge."

"Right? But it's not some noble quest, is it?" I laughed. "I don't like that foul Goddess. The way she threw me away like it was nothing...I'm going to make her wish she was dead. That's all."

I raised my hands in the air resolutely.

"Anybody gets in my way, I'm going to annihilate them without mercy."

Seras looked uncomfortable.

"Your beliefs and your idealistic justice, they don't play well with this vengeance stuff, do they?" I said, looking her straight in the eyes.

"No. But if you hadn't saved me today, I certainly would have been killed by the Elite Five. And I have no love for the Goddess of Alion myself. If I can be of any use to you in your quest, then..."

Seras laid one hand across her chest.

"Please, allow me to assist you." She dropped to one knee and lowered her head. "In the Emperor's eyes, Seras Ashrain is clearly dead. I am freed from my oath to him—cast aside with nowhere to go..." She trailed off.

"I know it might sound strange coming from me, but...revenge isn't good."

Nobody's going to thank me for this. I'm never going to be the hero of this story—not that I'd want to be.

"You don't think you're in the right?"

"I think it's right for me, that's all. It's a personal grudge, and I'm the only one who benefits in the end."

"That's exactly why I'd like to help."

"What?"

"As I said, I have my own opinions about the Goddess of Alion. But more than that, you put your life in danger to save me. I have a debt to you that must be repaid. If what you're doing is right for you, that is enough for me."

Seras, still on one knee, looked up at me.

"I have died once this day, but I live because of you. My only wish is to be useful to you, and you may use me however you see fit."

She sounds like she'd jump off a cliff if I asked her to, or loan me a

bunch of money, no questions asked. She's cautious at first, but open and honest once she trusts a person enough.

I took a breath.

"If you're willing to go that far, sure. Whatever you want."

"Thank you!"

Loyalty. Responsibility. These bonds are much stronger than the ones money can buy. You can trust the people you hire to want their reward enough to work for it, but there's always the risk that they'll betray you to a higher bidder. Bonds of true loyalty and responsibility are different, though. They're thick enough not to break or bend when tested.

"Can I count on you, Seras Ashrain?" I asked.

"I will not let you down, Sir Too-ka," she replied.

I can't say I didn't suspect this would happen. Why did I set off into the Dark Forest to save Seras? She does remind me of my foster mother—that wasn't entirely a lie. But I also thought it might make her feel compelled to help me. To Seras Ashrain, bonds are like chains. All I want is to get my revenge—no matter what.

"I'm sorry."

"Sir Too-ka?"

I put my hand on her shoulder.

"Someday I'll find a way to repay you, too."

Give and take.

We hurried onward, heading north, away from Mils and toward the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters. Seras told me of a small village a few days away, and we settled on it as our destination. We decided to split up before arriving—a single traveler would arouse less suspicion than a pair.

Regardless, seems like it's a pretty slim chance we'll be discovered.

Not only had Seras changed clothes, but her face was different, too. The spirit of light had settled, and Seras was able to disguise her appearance again. She chose a new face—though when I looked at her, I still saw the pointed ears and incredible beauty. She explained that her true appearance was only visible to me.

Pretty convenient features on these spirit things. Just gotta be careful to call her by her new pseudonym, Misura, at all times.

"Excuse me, but...would you mind if I referred to you as 'Master' in future conversation?" asked Seras, stopping and looking back at me

a little sheepishly. “I accidentally called you by your real name once, if you remember...”

I nodded.

That incident must’ve really bothered her.

“It might be a good idea. Sure. Call me whatever you want—I’ll leave it up to you.”

“Thank you for understanding.”

She’s so serious about this. “Master” is a heck of a way to refer to someone. Might take some getting used to on my end.

“I’m trusting you and Piggymaru to watch my back,” I said after a long pause. “Thanks for coming along.”

Seras smiled back at me warmly, and her clear eyes met mine.

“Yes, Master.”

Epilogue

AFTER TWO DAYS on the road, we reached the small village, halfway between Mils and the capital of Ulza. Seras and I had arrived separately, each booking our own rooms at the lone inn. Our destination, the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters, was further north past the capital. There were no signs that we were being tracked.

The strongest knights on the continent, the Black Dragon Knights, have lost their core leaders. The backbone of the country's military strength, gone in an instant. Maybe they don't even have the resources to track us anymore. Bakoss must be in chaos.

AFTER CHANGING out of her traveling clothes, Seras lay down to rest. As she stared up at the soot-blackened ceiling, her thoughts began to race.

Sir Too-ka...

Ever since he rescued her in the forest, she felt feverish whenever his face came to mind.

I think I've managed to conceal it from him, but...

In his presence, she remained his quiet, obedient servant with no plans to seek anything more.

Sir Too-ka has a clear goal and is determined to see it through to the end. I cannot distract him with other matters.

She was glad that they had separate rooms—she needed time to clear her head.

But to think he saved my life, just like that...

Without his intervention, she would surely have died. The bed creaked underneath her as she turned over. Her disguise had dropped, the spirits paid.

I should be able to sleep now. There's nothing stopping me—and yet I cannot. I'm tired enough, but I...I'm too restless to sleep. Too worked up.

“A lapse in concentration unbecoming the former captain of the Band of the Holy Knights—” She caught herself mumbling and stopped.

The thing that had her worked up had nothing to do with being a knight. She was kidding herself. Seras clutched a pillow to her chest.

Someone I can trust...

She could no longer deny it—he was that someone.

Who else would put their own life on the line, fight those Black Dragon Knights, even the Strongest Man in the World himself?

He saved her despite the odds against him. He believed her when to all appearances she had taken his blue dragonstone and run. Seras was almost ashamed that he'd been able to trust her so.

I was the one who suggested that I call him Master. Perhaps it was simply because I'm embarrassed to say his name. I feel...

She realized her body was hot—burning.

But he doesn't need my feelings for his journey. They would only get

in his way. I have to... For now, I have to...

Be the loyal knight. He was the master and she the servant, the traveling companion.

Be his sword.

And so, the knight Seras Ashrain closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep, her cheeks still warmed by thoughts of her master.



I stood in the center of the village square. Seras was still asleep in the inn, with Piggymaru on standby in my room. A bonfire lit up the area against the otherwise pitch-black night, sparks rising high into the sky.

The square was busy, lined with stalls and full of people. There was a group playing music for a dancing crowd, while other people milled about talking excitedly and joking, and others sat at long tables, trading stories over drinks. It seemed to be mostly village folk, but there were also some who looked like travelers.

We must've come here on a festival day—lucky for us. We can blend in easily enough, and if anyone asks, we're just here for the party.

I walked around to look at the stalls and listen in on conversations, but I didn't hear anything interesting. The Black Dragon Knights were mentioned, of course, but only in passing. *Something's happening over near Mils* was as detailed as it got.

I looked down at the palm of my hand to peek at my stats. Sleep was now level 3 and could be dispelled at will. It looked like its duration had gotten longer. I'd tested my new freeze skill on the road, too.

Freeze, like the name implied, covered a target in ice. It could only be applied to non-living targets, so it couldn't be stacked with other effects. Its range was about the same as the Sleep skill's. The only big difference was the duration, which was three hundred days.

I can't dispel it yet, though. Maybe once I've leveled it up a bit more. Right now, it isn't a skill to be used lightly.

"If it works the way I think it does..."

It could solve the problem of the suspicious corpses I keep leaving around. I'll test that out eventually.

One of the stalls caught my eye, and I walked over.

"Welcome, step right up!" A cheerful, middle-aged shopkeeper motioned toward the campfire. "How 'bout it—want to buy something and join in the fun?"

Looking around, I noticed that many of the dancing festivalgoers were wearing masks. There were all kinds of them laid out neatly on the shopkeeper's stall.

"Masks, huh?" I picked up the first one that caught my eye.

“Oh, so you’re a fan of the Lord of the Flies?”

“Lord of the Flies?”

“Never heard the tale, eh?” The shopkeeper began to tell the story, and I half paid attention while he talked.

“It’s a story about the Root of all Evil that spawned all the monsters you see today. The Lord of the Flies was a monster king, see, and he spent a hundred years defending his fortified island from invaders. But the Root of all Evil cast him out.”

“Lord of the Flies...”

“Well, he wasn’t having that! He gathered a bunch of warriors and fought the Demon King himself! Sure, they got wiped out, but they looked cool doing it. Maybe that’s why the kids like him—he’s a real popular character. Masks of him and his men all sell like hotcakes.”

I turned the mask over in my hands. The eyes were pointed and aggressive for a fly, not round like they’d usually be. The feelers looked like horns.

“An evil king?”

Wasn’t there a fly king back in the old world too?

“Is this mask rare?”

“Not at all—guy’s popular, like I said. You can find these things anywhere.”

Hmm...so they’re very common, available all over the place.

I picked up another mask with a different design.

“What about this one?”

“That’s one of his men. I’ve got the whole set—kids wear ’em when they’re playing monsters and knights, that kinda thing.”

An outcast. King of monsters.

“I’ll take one of each,” I said after a moment.

“Pleasure doin’ business with you! Glad I got to explain the story. There’s a mirror through the curtain over there if you wanna go try it on.”

The shopkeeper pointed me to a small tent next to his stall. I paid him, walked through the curtain, and stood in front of the mirror.

Might be a good idea to wear this thing when I have to act in public. I could assume a whole new identity. A mask sold all over the continent is the perfect disguise.

“Well, then...”

What should I do when they ask who I am? I can't pass as a merchant, not without anything to sell.

“The only option is...”

A mercenary. As long as I hold on to my weapons, I can pass for that. It'll be easy to hide my true intentions. Seras and I—our own mercenary band.

The Goddess Hunters.

I looked down at the Lord of the Flies mask in my hands.

Masked mercenaries—not exactly knights in shining armor. Practically the opposite, really.

I donned the mask.

My coronation.

When I looked into the mirror, a creature with black robes and the head of a demonic fly looked back at me.

A monster.

“Someday, Goddess Vicius, I'm going to dispose of you.”

Afterword

I'VE WRITTEN a little more here this time—this is Kaoru Shinozaki.

I should be better at this, but I'm always complaining to my editor that I still have no idea what to write in these author's notes. I find it easier to write stories than emails and notes. Talking on the phone uses up much less energy, making it much more convenient (mail has its own benefits, of course). It really drains me to write emails and notes like these...I wonder why?

But here goes—I have to write a few things about volume two, then.

We've finally left the Ruins of Disposal, and our hero has joined up with the high elf Princess Knight, Seras Ashrain. Their relationship and the distance between them are going to change in important ways moving forward. You can learn a lot about a character from their interactions with others, and I think the best things about character novels are these little encounters and developments. I'd like to really focus on that moving forward. Next, some acknowledgments—to my editor O-sama, I'm sorry for all the trouble and stress I must have caused you this year. Thank you for all the earnest and steady support you've given me, nonetheless. I'd also like to thank my illustrator, KWKM-sama. I'm more in love with Seras and all the other characters than I've ever been thanks to his designs. Every time we receive new drawings, I think again about how glad I am he agreed to illustrate this project. We're so fortunate to have him working with us.

Thank you as well to everybody who helped bring this volume into the world. Thank you to all my readers online who still leave incredibly supportive comments on the online release of this novel. To be frank, I don't know my own limits, but I'd like to continue to write as long as this journey will take me.

Thank you for buying this second volume. I'll be happy if you find some joy in it.

I hope we can meet in the next volume, where perhaps Too-ka's and Seras's relationship will deepen even further. Thank you very much for your support.



Thank you for reading!

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